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NICKY
SON OF EGG

By the same Author

THE HISTORY OF EGG PANDERVIL
THE WORLD IN BUD
THE SPANISH CARAVEL
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MR. GODLY BESIDE HIMSELF
THE STREET OF THE EYE

NICKY
SON OF EGG

By

GERALD BULLETT

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CHAPTER THE FIRST

THE CUB

I

SEEING their camp-fire burn low, the two boys hastened to replenish it with sticks and fir-cones and handfuls of crisp rust-coloured leaves; and when the fire blazed again they squatted down in the long grass, which, under the onrush of darkness, was beginning to sigh and rustle and change its greenness for the colour of slate-roofs. Responding to the mood of the hour and the magic desolation of the scene about them, they were silent for a long while. From time to time one of them, without getting up, tossed another stick or two into the flames. They felt lonely, courageous, mature. A cold wind fluttered out of nowhere and blew the woodsmoke—an acrid memorable smell—into their sensitive young nostrils. The elder boy, Ralph Tooley, was thirteen years old. The younger, Nicky Pandervil, was not quite twelve. Between them they had just relieved Kimberley.

From where he sat, hugging his knees, Nicky could see the field slanting darkly and steeply under him to the marshy bulrush beds, and thence rise again, in a more gradual ascent, to the row of conker-trees that flanked Coppett's Avenue. To the west, which was still stained with the after-glow of sunset, the chimney-pots of Albert Road presented to his vision a serrated horizon that might have been cut out of black paper, so artificial and insubstantial did it seem. At one point to the north-east, precisely at the east end of Coppett's Avenue, stood the ugly extensive building known as Coppett's Asylum for Infirm Watchmakers and Clockmakers, a place which Nicky's imagination, misled by a not unnatural confusion of ideas, peopled with aged bespectacled lunatics who spent what remained to them of life in a fantasy of witless and everlasting watchmending. In all other directions nothing was visible but field and trees and wool-gathering sky. Crouched on the summit of his green hill, at his back a belt of pines that completely hid the villas of Victoria Avenue a quarter of a mile away, he felt that at any moment, if he so chose, he could float out into space and remain indefinitely hovering in that mysterious middle distance. Coppett's Piece bred such fancies, especially when dusk came with its cold sighing

breath, and elms and oaks, having quietly dreamed the afternoon long, became quick with whispering noises. Abandoned by Coppett—a benefactor of whom little beyond his name is known—and not yet seized by the ubiquitous builder, it was a region queer, romantic, desolate, and delightful: queer by virtue of its switchback contours, those two monkey-trees, that suggestive fragment of brick wall, and that sculptured faun lying on his back naked and abandoned in the grass; and delightful because, although Nicky, the grocer's son, could reach it from his home in half an hour, it was in spirit so utterly remote from Farringay High Street. Coppett's Piece was a place where anything might happen.

At this very moment something began to happen.

'I spy blaggs,' said Nicky, suddenly breaking the silence.

'Where?' asked his companion sharply.

'Over there!' Nicky jumped to his feet and pointed. 'There's one, two . . .'

His computation was interrupted. 'Get down, you goat!' said Tooley. 'If they're really blaggs, we'll have to jolly well look out.'

Nicky, dropping into the grass, realized that his hero Tooley was afraid. This distressed him: not

because he despised the weakness but because, on the contrary, he shared it. His own fear was as yet of negligible dimensions, easy to control and to conceal: it owed its tenuous existence only to the face that 'scooting' at sight of an enemy was against the code.

'There's four of em,' said Tooley, having crept on his belly to a point of vantage. 'One's got a basket. Wonder what they're up to.'

'Have they seen us, do you think?' asked Nicky. 'Our smoke'll give us away, I expect.'

Tooley made no answer, being still absorbed in his work of observation. Presently he said over his shoulder: 'It's two to one, Pandy. And one of 'em's got a basket.'

It made matters the worse, to Nicky's mind, that one of them should carry a basket. The phrase had a sinister quality for him, and he wondered if Tooley shared this feeling. The enemy was no longer in his line of vision, for he still, remembering Tooley's rebuke, kept under cover. It was in his mind to ask: 'Shall we do a bunk, or stick it?' But by long experience he knew himself incapable of voicing the suggestion. Two to one was heavy odds, in face of which you might retreat with dignity; but he looked to Tooley for a lead, that being the convention of their relationship;

a chap could not seem to show funk until encouraged by his seniors to do so. Had the enemy been folks of their own kind, Nicky would not have felt like this. But these were different. The alien world, the world that existed beyond his immediate circle of friends and acquaintances, was divided for Nicky into blaggs and sops. These were enemy. He and his friends were ordinary folk. Sops, most of whom attended the Farringay Grammar School and flaunted green velvet caps with a golden badge, were objects rather of derision—perhaps of secret envy—than of definite hostility. But blaggs were quite another story, something almost subhuman. Blaggs—a term etymologists take pleasure in relating to blackguards—comprehended board-school boys, junior tramps, ill-disposed and ill-dressed strangers, and, pre-eminently, errand-boys with baskets. They were malicious and dirty; above all, dirty. There are two kinds of dirt. There is the honest dirt acquired by climbing trees and making mud-marbles, and, in general, not being a sop; and there is a dirt more than skin-deep, a pungent terrifying foulness perceptible equally to ears and eyes and nostrils—an emanation, as it seemed to Nicky, from the very soul of this alien race. In conflict with your fellows you might get black eyes and a bloody nose, and, what

was even worse, you might get torn clothes that would mean dire trouble at home. All this was natural and acceptable enough. But once get caught by blaggs, and there was no knowing what they would do to you. In was this unknown that Nicky dreaded. There were bloodcurdling stories told, and these, though he happily did not recall them now, had left a precipitate of terror in him.

'Are they coming this way?' asked Nicky.

'Shut your row!' whispered Tooley. 'They'll hear you.'

Without more words it was understood between them that though honour did not demand as yet that they should provoke a battle they were none the less precluded from deserting the field of danger. They were permitted to remain under cover; they were not permitted to retire. Each in his secret heart recognized, and perhaps a little resented, this romantic prohibition.

Once again Tooley glanced sharply over his shoulder, but now, though his lips moved, he made no sound. By this portent Nicky knew that the worst of the ordeal was yet to come and that the enemy was nearing them. Exquisite the anxiety of the next few minutes, during which time the boy, not being absorbed in the emotion of the moment,

was able at times to stand aside and see the whole episode objectively. It did not lose by this process anything of its essential quality, being rather enriched till this onlooker in Nicky had to admit that it was all very much worth while. This mood, however, was gone as soon as come, leaving him comfortless, unheroic, and the adventure unbeglamoured. More for company than for any strategic reason, he crawled on his belly towards the edge of the slope, not resting until he lay side by side with Tooley.

Tooley said: 'They've got some frogs or something down there. In the basket.'

It was too dark to discern what was in the basket, but the conjecture was so plausible, and so well supported by past experience, that Nicky shivered, feeling a little sick.

'What for?' he said.

The question was an idle one and was answered by the silence it deserved. Nicky knew as well as Tooley, as well as anyone, that 'a bit of fun with frogs' was one of the chief delights of blaggs. It was such things that constituted their blaggishness and made the very idea of them turn Nicky's stomach. As the silence lengthened he was aware of a sickness moving inside him. Finding suspense unbearable he moved forward several stealthy

inches and peered over the edge. The enemy, grouped at the bottom of the slope, were now clearly visible. One of their number was seated on an upturned basket, a straw in his mouth and something dark and alive in his hand. Three others stood by, watching, nudging, giggling, and encouraging him with obscene remarks. As the torture moved nearer its crisis Nicky knew that he could stay there no longer: he must go either backwards or forwards. At the same moment he heard Tooley whisper, close into his ear: 'Let's go and stop it. What do you say?' Nicky remembered that his right hand was clutching a large stone. Exultation filled him. The passive agony of watching was at an end.

'You armed?' he asked excitedly. And hardly waiting for an answer he struggled to his knees, gave a loud yell, and hurled his stone. He had aimed, having no thought for consequences, at the head of the Blagg-in-Chief, the fellow on the basket, but by happy chance his stone struck either the frog, so ending that bit of fun, or the hand that held the frog—he couldn't see which. There was immediately an outburst of screaming blasphemy. Nicky jumped to his feet recklessly exposing himself, a stone in each hand. The other blaggs, at sight of him, shouted to their leader:

'Geou on, Sid! Do 'im in, mate!' It seemed tacitly agreed that the quarrel was to be tried by single combat, but Nicky, having been companioned for many months with more experienced warriors than himself, knew better than to trust these others to stand by and see fair play. The frog-torturer took a pace or two forward. 'You come dahn 'ere!' he said invitingly. 'And see what you'll blurry well git.' By way of extra inducement he promised to castrate Nicky by an exceptionally painful process. Nicky stood waiting. His heart pumped furiously. That savage anger being once and for all spent in violence, he had nothing now but his own spirit to support him.

'You'd better be off,' he advised. 'Better go home.'

The blagg, encouraged by this mild cool voice, in which the trembling could hardly be disguised, began steadily and quickly climbing the slope.

'Stand back,' cried Nicky, 'or you'll get another one.'

Yet now, lacking unequivocal provocation, he could not bring himself to fling, from his greater height, another stone at this enemy. He stood in an agony of indecision and saw with dismay that the three other blaggs were following close in the wake of their leader, growling like dogs. He had

almost forgotten Tooley, who lay strangely passive in the grass.

And now the foremost blagg was all but upon him. ' 'It 'im in the blurry eye, Sid, and 'ave done with it!' shouted his gallant supporters. And at this cry the attack suddenly and dreadfully quickened its pace. It seemed to Nicky that monsters from all sides were bearing down upon him. But they were not bearing down, they were bearing up; and in that simple distinction lay his one advantage. Nervously at last, rather than with deliberation or intention, Nicky flung his stones. Both went wide of the mark, and the four threatening forms coalesced and became, in this fast gathering darkness, an octopus of horror. Nicky clenched his fists and struck out wildly; and at the same time there came a tremendous shout at his side and Tooley, making enough noise for an army, was laying about him furiously with his heavy stick. Nicky's fist reached something soft; the enemy scattered and gave ground. In ten seconds they were back on level ground at the bottom of the slope. Here they rallied and began a circling movement. Nicky, dancing round his burly but less nimble opponent, and not daring to come within reach of his long arm, saw in a quick glance to his left that the three others were closing

murderously on Tooley. It became essential therefore that this big fellow should somehow be disposed of. There was no time to lose. Nicky ceased his cavorting and stood quite still, waiting for his opponent, who thereupon took up the dance and in a series of lurches and feints, withdrawals and advances, came at him with both fists threatening. Came nearer, but not much nearer; the fellow was taking his time, and Nicky felt as perhaps a mouse feels when the cat's paw stretches towards it. Quite suddenly he got sick of waiting. He crouched, darted at his opponent, seized him round the hams, and flung him on his back. It was all over in a second. The body had fallen with a thud; Nicky paid no more attention to it, but turned at once to the rescue of his friend, to whose back a redheaded dirty-nosed blagg was clinging in an effort to throw him, while the other two, now armed with roughhewn cudgels, were rushing at him from the front. Nicky, wasting no time, thrust his hand under the chin of the climber and gave it a sharp jerk backwards; the fellow fell limply into the grass. It was all unbelievably easy; but Nicky judged, and judged truly, that this set-back, if it came short of finally defeating the enemy, would but infuriate them the more. It was on the tip of his tongue to say: 'Quick, Tooley! Let's do a bunk

for it!' But, as the two rascals picked themselves out of the grass, another idea visited him. He ran two paces up the slope, and making a trumpet of his hands called to the heights above: 'Cooee, Brown! Cooee, Jones! Blaggs here! Up and at 'em!' He was back in the battlefield in time to see Tooley making gestures of derision at four retreating figures. The battle was over.

Vociferous, mutually admiring, and relating over and over again the chief incidents of the late war, the two boys hurried homewards.

'I didn't half give him a wunner,' said Tooley. 'But three to one was a bit too thick, it was. Lucky you came along when you did, Pandy.'

'Funny the way my one flopped down,' said Nicky. 'Like as if he was dead, almost. Flabby lot they seem when you get at them.'

And so on, a feast of triumph, excited rather than boastful, and already coloured a degree more richly than life by the artist hand of memory. They burst into song, a topical song of which Edward the Seventh's hoped-for coronation was the theme:

We'll be merry
Drinking whisky, wine and sherry,
We'll be merry
On Coronation Day.

'Walloping for me very likely,' said Tooley. 'Must be jolly late, you know.' They reached the end of Tooley's road and here their ways divided. 'Glad it's Saturday to-morrow, aren't you?'

'Yes,' said Nicky. 'You coming out, I s'pose?'

'You bet,' agreed Tooley. 'Have you got to help your pater in the morning?'

'Dessay I shall, but I'll be coming out some time 'fore dinner.'

'All right then. See you down Coppice.'

Nicky Pandervil walked thoughtfully on and turned into Farringay High Street. To his alarm he found Pandervil's Stores in darkness. It was after closing-time! Already conscious of being in disgrace he knocked at the house door his special knock—two short taps close together, pause, and two more. It was opened to him by Selina Bush the young woman of all work.

'Where you bin,' said Selina, 'this time of night? And just look at them dirty boots on my nice clean floor.'

Nicky estimated these reproaches at their true worth and significance, which was nothing at all. He knew that he could get round Selina, and that Selina enjoyed being got round. 'Where's Ma?' said he. 'I say, Selina, is she in an awful wax about me?'

'Your Ma's ill-a-bed. Took worse she is, and calling people out of their names something dreadful. If it wasn't for your poor father I wouldn't stay another minute, and I don't care who knows it.'

To this recital the boy paid but little attention: he had heard it all so often before. That his mother was ill did not surprise or alarm him; she was always more or less ill. 'Where's Dad?' said he.

'In the kitchen at his supper,' answered Selina. 'Where else? And you just wash them hands, me lord, before you takes a single bite. Why, what's this?' She seized Nicky by the shoulders and drew him towards the jet of gaslight that dimly lit the little hall. Nicky, flinching under her scrutiny, became aware of his swollen underlip. He wriggled free and plunged into the kitchen to greet his father.

'Hullo, Dad!'

His father, thin, grey-whiskered, elderly, was seated at the kitchen table munching bread and dripping, with one eye on his newspaper, which was propped against the loaf. At his son's entry he looked up, peered over the rims of his reading spectacles, and gazed in mild surprise. It was his customary welcome, for he had never, it seemed,

quite outlived his astonishment at being the begetter of so young and lively a thing as Nicky. Always when taken unawares, as now, he had the air of seeing the miracle for the first time.

'Well, my boy?' said he. Then, remembering something, he shook his head gravely. 'Where've you been all this time? Didn't I tell you you got to be in at seven o'clock sharp? And your lip's swollen, if I know anything.'

'Yes, but you see, Dad, me and Tooley got into an adventure . . .'

'I dessay you did,' said his father grimly. 'But that doesn't answer my question. Seven o'clock sharp means seven o'clock sharp, and it doesn't mean half-past eight, not by any manner of means. See?'

Nicky saw. He was silent. He took his place at the table without a word, but during the next five minutes he shot many a shy tentative glance at his father, who, having resumed his reading, contrived to appear not to notice these mute appeals, and made a stern show of opening out the newspaper, re-folding it at a new page, and holding it before his face.

Presently Nicky ventured to say: 'Hullo, Dad!'

'Well?' said his father.

'Tooley and me,' said Nicky, 'we had an adventure to-night down Coppice.'

'H'm!' Mr Pandervil did not raise his eyes from his reading. 'Down Coppice Piece?'

'Yes,' said Nicky. And then he achieved a phrase that had been running like music in his mind for half an hour past. 'We had a brush with the blaggs, Dad.'

His father let fall the newspaper and leaned forward. 'A brush with the blaggs, eh? Let's hear about it, my boy.'

2

After that grim experience school was for a while a definitely pleasant part of life, not merely something neither good nor bad that was taken for granted. All the world, it seemed—a world comprising the thirty-three boys in Nicky's form—was talking of Tooley and Pandervil's marvellous exploit: how they had assaulted and put to flight a dozen large and dreadful blaggs. It was Hart who, in the excess of his devotion to Pandy, had multiplied the number of blaggs by three: not in a spirit of mere mendacity but because he was carried into a poetic flight by the exuberance of his feelings. Hart was a small, dark, dynamic creature, and Pandy's special friend in school and

playground, Tooley being his boon companion only out of school hours. To Tooley, who was a Fifth Form boy, Nicky Pandervil was a mere kid, and it was only the accident of their homes being so near each other that drew them together. Tooley was a home friend; Hart, who lived two miles in the opposite direction, was a school friend; and Nicky, who had never given to this distinction, or to the paradox arising from it, a moment's thought, was yet aware of it. The paradox was that with Tooley, who was merely 'a chap he knew', he was on visiting terms, whereas of the domestic life of Hart, his sworn chum, he knew and was content to know nothing at all.

'Did you hit him on the nose, Pandy?' Days had passed since the great event, but Hart had not yet tired of it.

'Well,' said Nicky, 'it *felt* like a nose, but I couldn't exactly see.'

'Good man!' Hart's eyes flashed in vicarious triumph. 'Did it bleed a good lot, d'you think?'

Unanswerable question. 'First it felt sort of hard and then it felt sort of soft, like . . . like bread and milk.'

'Oo!' cried Hart. 'P'raps you *broke* his beastly nose for him, hey?'

Nicky shook his head. 'I don't think so,' he said modestly. He was surprised and a little repelled by Hart's pleasure in the slaughter, though warmed by his admiration. 'There goes first bell.'

First bell was a warning tinkle; second bell, longer, was a summons. The noise in the playground did not perceptibly diminish, although plump Mr Glove, the youngest of the three masters, stood watchful in the schoolroom doorway with the bell in his hand ready to ring again.

'I say, Pandy!' A rawboned lad with red ears and prominent teeth came running up. 'Have you and Hart seen what old Mountain's been and written up in the lavvatry?'

'No,' said Nicky. 'What has he?'

Red Ears giggled. 'Come and have a squint at it.' Nicky made no response. 'Come on, Hart!'

'If it's so funny, tell us, can't you!' suggested Nicky. 'First bell's gone.'

'Oh come on, Pandy,' said Hart, pulling at his arm.

Old Mountain, whose age was twelve and a half, was still admiring his own handiwork when Nicky and Hart joined his audience. They pushed forward to get a clear view of the masterpiece. Nicky rather disliked Mountain, but he was curious to see what he had written. He saw, and made a

grimace at what he saw. It was the usual thing and just like Mountain, thought Nicky; and he felt a twinge of shame for his now satisfied, or frustrated, curiosity. He suddenly wanted to take it out of that swanker Mountain, who was now adding to his laurels by reciting all the naughty words he knew.

'Do you call that funny! I don't,' said Nicky.

The recitation went on unchecked.

'I know something funnier than that,' said Nicky contemptuously. 'Got a pencil on you, Hart? Gimme!'

'Bell's gone!' shouted a boy at the edge of the crowd. But only the most timid were deterred from pressing forward to see what Pandervil was up to, him that had fought twenty blaggs down Coppice. 'What's he written?' Loud laughter in anticipation of delight. 'Let's have a look at what Pandy's put!'

Nicky's inscription was a great success with its public. They howled and hooted and jeered, the jeers being directed against Mountain, who, flushed to the ears and scowling, was almost the last to read the writing on the wall. Nicky had written: *Mountin is a dirty tike.* A very sober statement of fact, but it passed for wit among Mountain's former admirers. It was, oh, terribly

funny; and, in view of the respective sizes of the two boys, almost unbelievably rash on Pandy's part. Mountain was in the Lower Fifth and was a notorious arm-twister. The world waited expectantly for the slaughter of the innocent.

Mountain looked ugly and threatening. 'Pay you out for that, after!' he promised. Second bell had gone, and they were all in danger of being late for roll-call. That fact only, in the general opinion, had saved Pandervil from immediate extinction, although . . . after all, he had made pretty short work of those blaggs down Coppice Piece.

Eighteen boys were late for roll-call, the earliest of them arriving only in time to see the door of the schoolroom shut against them. They stood outside and trembled at thought of the wrath to come. Both Nicky and Hart were of the company of the damned. Inside the big yellow room, with its rows of worn desks, and its walls decorated with advertisements of the British Empire, Mr William Beddo, the principal, was calling the roll. This ceremony would be followed by prayers, after which—'Here he comes!' said Hart, and the sound of a turning key attracted all eyes to the door. Mr Glove, a youngish man whose hands and face seemed to ooze out of his clothes as though he were

made of underdone pastry, stood with pencil and notebook in hand to take the names of the delinquents as they filed past him up the steps. 'Ah, Pandervil, I thought *you* would be among the late ones! Wasn't it your little legs I saw gambolling across to the lavatory after first bell? I think so. I think so. And you too, Master Hart. We must learn to regulate our bodily functions with more discretion. Musn't we, Mountain? What, Benson, too! And Gray, and Oxenham, and Madders. Musn't we, Poole? I think so. I think so.' Wilting under the stern eye of Mr Beddo, who glared at them from his throne, the late boys, their names duly noted in Mr. Glove's little book, attached themselves to their respective classes. They despised Mr Glove more than they hated him, recognising his dreary facetiousness as but a poor imitation of another and more tolerable master, Mr Stagg, on whom this comparative newcomer was sedulously modelling himself. Mr Stagg had been at the school as long as even the oldest of the boys could remember, and it was he who took charge of Nicky's form for the first hour of this morning.

'Latin,' whispered Hart, who shared a double desk with Nicky. '*Amo, amas,* Stagg is an ass.'

The subject of this verse was at the moment occupied in writing on the blackboard a list of

words and sentences for translation, and, pending that operation, the thirty-three boys of the Fourth Form were understood to be completing, by silent concentration, their mastery of a set passage in Eutropius. But even those who took the lesson seriously were not silent, and their devotional murmurings provided such idlers as Nicky and Hart with ample cover for conversation, apart from the fact that in this big schoolroom, where four classes were conducted at once, there was inevitably an incessant buzz compounded of various small sounds.

'Wonder what we shall get for being late,' said Hart.

'Lines, I expect,' answered Nicky. 'Or else cubes.'

'One or the other, of course. Any donkey knows that.' Hart was genially scornful. 'Point is, which? I hope it's a cube, don't you?'

To be 'given a cube' meant that in expiation of his sin the sinner was required to find by simple multiplication the cube of a given number (containing four, five, or six figures, according to the degree of the sin), and to 'prove' his answer by division. Both with masters and boys, though for different reasons, cubes were a very popular form of punishment. All the masters set them; all the

more intelligent of the boys made a point of preserving these fruits of detention; so that after a term or two it was only by a stroke of unusually bad luck that a boy was set a cube of which neither he nor his friends possessed a crib. Mr Glove was the master most addicted to repeating his cubes, because his malice prompted him to severity and he could not keep away from eights and nines. Four nines and an eight was his favourite, and it was his victims' favourite, too. They could never be sure where the eight would fall, but they soon had all five possibilities worked out and ready to hand. Both Nicky and Hart were counting confidently on Mr Glove's ill nature. Their fear was that Wim himself might set the imposition. Wim, the headmaster, was so called on account of his signature in the monthly report-books—*Wm. Beddo.*

'Call me a donkey, would you!' said Nicky. 'All right, Hart my child. You wait. I'll owe you one for that.' With an air of grim determination, which meant nothing but that he was enjoying his game, he took a little black notebook from his pocket and licked the point of his pencil. 'I'll put it down in my book.'

'I do feel frightened!' mocked Hart.

Nicky's notebook contained a list of Men to be

Paid Out, their names grouped, and their offences tabulated, under the misleading heading: 'Dr. to N. Pandervil.' A certain Richards, it appeared, had on the third day of February 1901 'called me a swanker'; but justice had speedily overtaken this fellow, for in the right-hand column there was the sinister remark, 'Paid out, 4 Feb. N.P.' Against Hart there were several entries, such as 'Kicked me in Gography', and, less specific, 'Wouldent stop mucking about with my ink-well'. These last offences were still unpunished, as indeed were the greater number here recorded. Nicky, with no attention to spare for Latin grammar (I regret to say that he thought it silly to have twelve different ways of saying 'this', and no one had told him about the Romans), idly turned these private pages, in which were noted, not only these pretended grudges, a record as innocent of conscious humour as of any malice, but his scores at cricket, miscellaneous items of information concerning such things as Mount Everest, the Meridian, and Habeas Corpus, and a list of *Best Books that I have read* which included works by Ballantyne, Stevenson, Farrar, Annie S. Swan, Silas Hocking, Conan Doyle, Mrs. Craik, and Seton Merriman. They contained also a few scraps of doggerel, of which the couplet quoted by Hart was one.

Nicky during class was bounded on the left by a wall, on the right by Hart, and at his back by the chemistry cupboard, this last a piece of fine old oak in which were kept such test-tubes, beakers, and retorts as Mr Goff, the visiting science master, had not as yet broken for the entertainment of the boys, together with various substances in bottles of which he, and he only, knew the names. Nicky was not alone in believing his position to be one of exceptional security. In this corner, undetected by authority, he could talk, he could correspond with his friends, he could learn the deaf-and-dumb alphabet from Hart, he could even sing. And, in a discreet fashion, making himself audible only to his immediate neighbours, he did sing. His father privately thought him a musical genius, for no better reason than that he had a natural sense of harmony and habitually sang seconds. Richards, whose back Nicky's pencil was at this moment prodding, could emit a rumbling noise that passed for bass; Benson, who sat on Richards' right, just in front of Hart, was a master of simple melody; and these three constituted with Nicky himself 'the Choir', an institution, self-created and to many of its beneficiaries unknown, whose function it was to enliven the tedium of lessons like Latin and Algebra and English Grammar.

Richards, in response to the prodding, looked stealthily round. 'What's up?'

'Choir practice,' said Nicky, 'will now begin.'

'*Cave!*' whispered Hart. 'Stagg's looking.'

The four noses of the Choir were plunged into Eutropius. But in a moment or two Mr Stagg turned back to his blackboard, and Nicky tried again.

'No,' said Richards. ''Snot safe with Stagg. Wait till Chemistry.'

'Come on, Rich!' whispered Nicky urgently. 'I say, don't be a beastly rotter!' Richards, however, insisted on being a beastly rotter. He indulged his corrupt nature by repeating his refusal and then taking refuge in a silence from which no amount of prodding could dislodge him. 'All right,' said Nicky. 'I'll jolly well owe you one for that, Rich.'

He entered this new debt in his little book and was soon happy again. The Latin hour wore pleasantly away. The day had started well, and the afternoon held promise of the chemistry lesson, an orgy of delight and disorder that was the most eagerly anticipated event of the week. Mr Goff was a shabby little man who wore a large square beard instead of a necktie. His frock coat was green with age; his cuffs were soiled; at the point of his thin nose there hung, in cold weather, a

glistening pearl; his eyes, magnified by strong lenses, were big with childish surprise. His precarious dignity made him the more comical in the eyes of these young barbarians, who, being snobs by instinct and training, had neither pity nor respect for him. Where on earth did Wim Beddo pick the old man up? And how came such an obvious tramp to know anything about chemistry? No one knew. But if the boys were surprised at his learning, he was apparently no less so. Surprise, not unmixed with bewilderment, was his normal state. He was surprised when his experiments failed; and, with more cause, he was surprised when they succeeded. When by adding hydrogen to oxygen he produced water, his pleasure was—or to an adult spectator would have been—pathetic. When something unexpectedly exploded and the world became full of flying glass, his astonishment would have made angels weep for him. It did not make schoolboys weep. Indeed, the cruelty of schoolboys caused him most surprise of all. So noisy they were, so thoughtless, so rude—he could not understand such behaviour. He was like a child in a bear-pit. But the best of Mr Goff, from Nicky's point of view, was that, being for the most part absorbed in these distresses, he left Nicky and his circle to their musical and epistolary devices.

A quiet concert, a busy exchange of notes, the consumption of toffee (four ounces a penny at Ball's in the High Street), cutting a railway system on the desk-lid, and sketching faces in the back pages of an exercise book: these were, for Nicky, the delights associated with science.

'Give that notebook to me, Pandervil!'

It was Mr Stagg's voice, and Nicky, brutally roused from reverie, was aware of Mr Stagg in person standing within two yards of him. A slight sickness seized him. He burned with confusion and could utter no word.

And now the notebook was in Mr Stagg's hand, and Mr Stagg was turning its pages.

'Pandervil! Is this how we learn our Eutropius? Is this how we qualify for the battle of life? Is it, Pandervil?'

'No, sir!'

'How then?' inquired Mr Stagg. 'Is it rather in detention, when our little friends are released from school? Is it, Pandervil? I think so. I think so . . . But what's this? A modicum of Latin after all! Well, well, well!' Nicky's fear became suffocating. What he had most dreaded was about to happen. Mr Stagg read out relentlessly: '*Amo, amas,* Stagg is an ass. *Amas, amat,* my old tom-cat . . . And what comes next, Pandervil?'

What came next, in Nicky's imagination, was that he would be reported to Wim Beddo and publicly caned. He said nothing. He stared, speechless and helpless, at the lid of his desk. But Mr Stagg repeated his question. 'What comes next? What comes after *amo, amas, amat,* Pandervil?'

'*Amamus, amatis* . . .'

'Precisely!' said Mr Stagg. '*Amo, amas,* Stagg is an ass. *Amas, amat,* my old tom-cat. Yours is a zoological muse, Pandervil. *Amat, amamus,* you can't blame us. *Amamus, amatis,* how bald his pate is! . . . How will that do, Pandervil?'

He glared at Nicky with grim friendliness. Nicky wanted to cry. He could not join, as yet, in the general laughter with which the class acknowledged Mr Stagg's little joke, a joke only half against himself, for Mr Stagg's hair, though grey, was plentiful. He had a crooked nose and a cleft chin; he presented an odd appearance by reason of his fierce eyebrows and the excessive height of his collar; but he was not bald, and the class therefore felt safe in laughing.

'To-night, Pandervil, in detention, I shall finish your verses for you. And you shall learn your Eutropius. I think so. I think so.'

This was the beginning of something that

caused, in Hart and others, a good deal of perplexity and some indignation: Nicky's devotion, not merely to Mr Stagg—that could be forgiven, Mr Stagg being admittedly a decent old buffer—but even to Latin. And two years later he struggled desperately into the Sixth.

3

Egg Pandervil was now sixty-seven. Nicky was his Benjamin. His three other children had never been to him what Nicky was—a consolation prize. Mabel and Bob were both married and had children of their own; and Harold, who after a bad beginning had become a great help in the shop, was understood to be courting one of the several young women with whom he spent his leisure evenings. These three were unimportant facts in Egg's life; the important ones were Nicky his youngest son and Carrie his wife, the one more interesting to him every day, the other an enduring misfortune on which, in self-protection, his mind refrained from dwelling. He had ceased to think of his marriage as a disaster because he had ceased to think of his marriage; on Carrie he spent nowadays as little thought as, after a lifetime of endurance, a crippled man will spend on his

deformity. Ten years before, and less, he had regarded her with incessant compassion and had suffered many a pang of unreasoned and undeserved self-reproach. But now such emotions stirred in him only when he remembered that she was still, whatever she might seem, a human creature and by force of habit the object of his involuntary affection. She, by the very excess of her malice, made it easy to forget that simple, subtle truth. Greedy, it seemed, to be loved and served, she yet frustrated his friendly impulses by turning herself into an instrument of petty torture; and pity itself lost heart in face of her extravagant demands upon it. Her illness had become her pride; she never admitted to feeling even a little better; and her complaints—which took the form of saying: 'It's the Lord's will and I mustn't complain'—were so unvarying that Egg had lost the power of distinguishing between the true and the false. It stood to reason that a woman suffering from as many serious disorders as the doctor diagnosed in Carrie must be frequently in pain; yet it was certain that the reality came short of her pretensions. But was it certain? Was anything certain? Ah, there was the difficulty! All he knew was that he must do his best for her, and, every day, by the mercy of heaven, contrive to forget her

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for a quiet hour or so. In both endeavours he was loyally aided by Selina the Elp.

And if Egg, instinctively avoiding the subject, thought seldom of his wife as a human being, Nicky seldom thought of his mother at all. A familiar part of life, yet a being monstrously unlike ordinary people, she was at once too near and too remote to engage even his curiosity. Of her mind he knew and guessed nothing. He did not know, for example, that by loving his father he had crushingly defeated the prime if unconscious purpose of her everlasting anger. In the far-off days before she had become permanently bedridden he had learned to avoid her, and he nowadays paid her in her bedroom only such duty visits as she demanded or his father enjoined. His brothers, too, were little more than acquaintances. Bob was tremendously old and had a moustache and a wife; and Harold, a man of twenty-four or so, spent very little time at home. As for Mrs Bob, of whom people whispered behind her back that she had once been a skivvy (like Sleena, thought Nicky), she was such a lady, so well dressed and polite, that it seemed a piece of cheek to be calling her Kitty, even though she was one's sister-in-law. And Mabel, his real sister, was merely a middle-aged woman who insisted on kiss-

ing him whenever she came or went. Home, for Nicky, meant Dad and Sleena, with Ma as a calamitous background. It meant, in addition to these, all friends and activities that were not either of the school or of the chapel. Sunday, a day spent in chapel and Sunday School, with a midday interval for the consumption of beef and Yorkshire pudding, constituted a category in itself, a curious break in the continuity of ordinary existence. It had not escaped Nicky's attention that there were worlds within his world. Home was different from school, school was different from Sunday; these were three of many circles contained within the larger circle of his consciousness, and he alone, it seemed, possessed the mysterious power of stepping out of one and into another. Other boys experienced Sunday, perhaps, but not his Sunday—a notion, this, quite independent of the accident that not one of his schoolfellows happened to be of the Ebenezerite persuasion. And if in fact these worlds did sometimes chance to impinge one upon the other, the effect, to Nicky's perception, was so queerly incongruous as only to emphasise their essential separateness. It was as if the characters of one story had strayed into another, as if bits of R. M. Ballantyne had become absurdly entangled with John Halifax Gentleman. This confusion

seldom occurred, because in fact things could not, try as they might, sustain their reality for Nicky in more than one of his worlds; the failure was exemplified in Ralph Tooley, who, being a near neighbour, a domestic friend, became something quite different when he was within the precincts of the school, something at best a stranger, at worst a mere hypothesis. If this proved anything, it proved, not that there was but one world, but that there were two Tooleys, a school Tooley and a home Tooley. I do not pretend that Nicky got so far in fantasy as this, or that his mind intellectualized its sensations. But it did, wittingly or unwittingly, make idle pictures of them, and sometimes, half dreaming, he played with the pretence that there were three Nickies, or more, one for each of these worlds that he inhabited. He told, and could have told, such fancies to no one. Though recurrent, they were the most transitory, the most elusive wisps of sensation; never concrete enough for thought, too light and brief to leave legible mark on the mind that from time to time entertained them, they were secrets not only from others but from himself.

A problem that more actively engaged him, when he had time or thought to spare from the strenuous business of being a schoolboy, which meant doing homework, playing games, placating

or outwitting masters, and twice a day traversing the ground to and from Wim Beddo's Select Academy, was concerned with the mysterious behaviour of Harold and Selina, whom, one Sunday afternoon at a time when he was thought to be at Sunday School, he overheard exchanging urgent whispers behind the closed door of the pantry. At first innocently curious, then less innocently so, he listened with held breath. The man's voice was commanding, cajoling, entreating; the woman's, fearful, yet with a queer note that half-contradicted the fear. Fantastic conjectures, things without form or face, loomed in Nicky's excited brain. He felt ashamed of listening, yet could not drag himself away. This hidden thing attracted him, irresistibly, against his will, just as Mountain's audacious scripture on the lavatory wall had (until he read it) attracted him two years ago. He was alight with elemental curiosity. What was happening behind that closed door? He could not imagine. He was densely ignorant. But instinct whispered that the secret held for him a profound significance. Fancy rioted; he shuddered, feeling unclean; but his hunger and thirst for the forbidden knowledge outlived this moment of shame. What is it, what is it? his mind persisted. It's something like what that beast Bligh drew . . .

no, it can't be that. What is it? It's something awful or Dad woulduv told me when I asked him. What can it be? Can it be that . . . or that . . . or . . . I wonder what it is. Something *dirty*. . . . Of that much he felt certain; round that central idea his thoughts fluttered in sick, eager, frustrated curiosity.

They were coming out! The sight of the turning door-handle broke the evil spell. His limbs were unlocked, and he tiptoed stealthily away to think and dream and frighten himself with a variety of pictures that included one of his brother Harold in prison for years and years. Was it something they put you in prison for? It surely was. It was the worst thing that anyone could do, worse than murder, or else Dad would have told him about it when he had asked so urgently. But Dad, instead of telling him, had answered vaguely, hastily, something about when he was older, all in good time. Good time was no time; he wanted to know now.

His need to know, since Harold was involved in this matter, became clamorous, imperative; and at last, in desperation, he asked Selina herself. For Selina was not a lady. She was a commonplace familiar person who had been, and was still, something of a mother to him. In his earlier childhood

she had bathed him and put him to bed, and now that he was older she was a most comfortable person to talk to, for when she wasn't cross she talked with neither ceremony nor authority, as to an equal. And, most important of all, she knew. She could not pretend to ignorance, could not evade his questions; for if necessary he would frighten her into telling him. She was twenty-nine to his fourteen, but he could frighten her this time. In his determination to get at the heart of the mystery he set aside all tender scruples.

'Sleena, what was it you and Harold were talking about in the pantry last Sunday?'

The change in Selina effected by this simple question was frightening. Taken quite unawares she almost snarled in her terror, with bared teeth and widened eyes. ' Whadja mean, talking about in the pantry! Whadja mean!'

Frightened, trembling, Nicky stuck to his guns. 'You thought I was at Sunday School, but I wasn't. I just went for a walk and then came back home to have a read. And I heard you'n Harold——'

'O Gaw!' exclaimed Selina. 'You bin spying on us, 'ave you? Silly young fool 'e was. I told 'im it wasn't safe.' Dull-eyed now, she stared at Nicky miserably. 'Kept your mouf shut, 'ave you? Not bin and told anyone?'

Nicky was offended. 'What d'you take me for? I'm not a sneak, thank you. Besides, I don't know anything to tell. I don't know anything.' After a pause he repeated: 'I don't know anything about . . . all that. No one'll tell me. I'm sick of not knowing. I only think things and . . . dream things.'

Selina looked at the boy with a new bright interest. 'What things, ducky?'

'You needn't call me those baby names any longer. I'm not a beastly baby.'

'All right, ducky! What things?' she repeated coaxingly. 'Come and tell Sleena all about it, there's a lamb.'

He hesitated. But after all it was only old Sleena; and, whatever had happened in the pantry, she was still the same Sleena, familiar and ordinary and easy to talk to. He decided to bargain with her. 'If I tell you, will you tell me?'

The compact was made, the confidences exchanged, the dreams told and interpreted. In his eagerness to know, Nicky lost all sense of shyness or shame; in her readiness to tell, Selina quite forgot the polite art of avoiding plain speech. She told him all that he wanted to know, and more than all; and it was clear even to himself that she was tremendously enjoying the wonder and horror,

the breathless hot-eyed attention, with which he listened. For perhaps the first time in her life she held the centre of the stage and had a perfectly responsive audience on whose mind she could play whatever wild tune she chose. She was excited, dangerously, with her sense of sudden power. But when she at last approached her personal confession she remembered to demand the usual ritual promise.

'You'll never tell? Not anyone!'

'Course not,' said Nicky.

'Say: Cut me froat, wishermer die!'

'Cut me throat, wishermer die!' intoned Nicky. 'But,' he added, in a voice of utter dejection, 'you needn't bother to tell me any more, Sleena. I know everything now.'

'*That* you don't!' returned Selina. 'Not by a long way, ducky. Me and Harold——'

'Oh shut up about it, do!' Nicky had had an overdose of knowledge. His curiosity was satisfied, and his life, he thought, was spoilt. It was horrible, horrible, this nasty secret thing that was secret from him no longer. Life was horrible, ugly; it didn't bear thinking about. Men, above all, were beastly; and he himself would soon be a man. It was clear, too clear, that he would soon be a man. He thought suddenly of his parents, and

shuddered. Even Dad. . . . But that thought pulled him up; there was something here that would not square with his raw puritanism. He was learning quickly.

'Of course,' said Selina, with an arm round his shoulder, and peering earnestly into his face, 'he wouldn't do it to jest anyone, Harold wouldn't!' She spoke proudly, the chosen concubine.

Nicky shrugged himself free and stood up. 'It's beastly all the same. It's . . . wicked.' He stared with new curiosity at Selina, now suddenly revealed as a wicked woman. She looked much the same as usual: homely, good-natured, a bit common (he thought) but he was used to her and had always more or less liked her. The puzzling thing was that he more or less liked her even now. 'I'm going down Coppice,' he said. He must think this thing out alone.

'He wouldn't do it to jest anyone,' reiterated Selina. . . .

After this conversation Nicky was vaguely wretched for days, and he hated Harold so much that he couldn't remain in the same room with him. Harold had never occupied an important place in his affections; being ten years older he practised the authority of a father without a father's gentleness; and certainly Egg, from the first, had been

more of a brother to Nicky than ever Harold had been. But now, for a while, Nicky's indifference gave way to active dislike; the thought of Harold and Selina was poison to him, a poison that permeated all his sexual imaginings. This grotesque thing he had discovered was worse than Mountain's lavatory humour, worse even than the pictures that that beast Bligh was so fond of drawing and showing round the class, worse than anything. . . . Yet, as time passed, and the new knowledge gradually lost its newness, a gleam of light visited his sick heart, a heaven-sent suspicion that this truth was not the whole truth, that perhaps something remained untold that would make all the difference between ugliness and beauty. He had read a good deal about love; for lately, quite abandoning Ballantyne and his kind, he had been borrowing books, on his father's ticket, from the Free Library: sentimental novels, from which, however, he got almost as much perplexity as entertainment. The fantastic world these novels offered him was a welcome change from African jungles and Canadian snows, and the scene in which Richard Strangeways is released from his betrothal vows by noble Edna Howard moved him profoundly; wrung his heart, brought tears to his eyes, made him wonder how on earth, after that, Richard could go off and say to

the beautiful second girl of his choice: 'Little woman, you have made me the happiest man in the world.' The story ended happily enough for Richard, the wedding-bells of the last chapter being followed, at a discreet distance, by an epilogue for the accommodation of a little Richard; but it left Nicky grieving, yearning, over sweet sad Edna Howard. He fell pensively in love with Edna Howard; in his mind he lived that scene over and over again, with himself in the place of Richard, but behaving, in the end, not at all as Richard had behaved. He begged Edna's forgiveness; he whispered (in the solitude and darkness of his bedroom) endearments that, in daylight, he blushed to remember; and she received back her ring and allowed him to hold her in his arms. Yes, he had known romance; he was not quite a stranger to love; the emotion induced in him by that less than nothing, that dream within a dream, was as authentic, in its degree, as Antony's passion for Cleopatra. Innocent and ardent, it had lived its brief span nourished on nothing more substantial than the memory of a voice heard only in imagination. A voice incomparably sweet and grave and tender, a heart brimmed with charity: that was the sum of Edna Howard. He never quite succeeded in imagining a face for her.

To this fond fancy his mind now returned, in quest of some key that should release him from his present perplexity. The girls he saw in the flesh were nothing; not one of them ever entered the luminous haze of his reveries, and in the daylight of ordinary active existence he was ready enough to acquiesce in the verdict of his contemporaries, that love—'love and kissing and all that'—was a softy's game, unworthy of a fellow's attention. But even while paying tribute to this conventional belief he half-questioned its sincerity, for every-one in the Sixth knew that Lawson, for one, and Prothero, for another, were in the habit of meeting girls from the High School in Windermere Avenue; and Bateman, boldest of all, made a practice of walking home from the Saturday cricket matches in the company of Hudson's haughty sister. Nicky couldn't but admire Bateman, envying him if not his conquest certainly his courage, his audacity, and above all his singular indifference to public opinion. Bateman, however, was sixteen and possessed several sisters of his own: two facts which, taken in conjunction, probably made all the difference, thought Nicky. In Wim Beddo's Academy the name of Eileen Hudson was a powerful spell: a joke, if you like, but also the symbol of a dawning aspiration. They were all

afraid of her except the dashing, well-mannered Bateman; and he, I dare say, was more afraid than any of them. To Nicky, who had chanced to observe the hero slowly taking off his pads in the pavilion and visibly nerving himself for the greater battle that was to come, some hint of this paradox was revealed. It was clearly a tremendous enterprise, this talking to a girl; and the reward must surely be commensurate with the dangers. He sometimes wished that Eileen had possessed a plain sister, less alarmingly neat and clean, less cool and ladylike, for himself—when nobody was looking —to practise on. He wondered if Bateman had ever kissed Eileen. It seemed impossible, and yet. . . . He did not need telling, by Bateman or anyone else, that to kiss someone, someone quite young who was neither aunt nor cousin, would be the most marvellous, the most revealing thing that could ever happen. The thought was a leaping flame in him.

Ugly things came sometimes to work havoc in his thoughts, and might, with silence aiding, have left an enduring mark upon him had he not chanced at this time to discover poetry, and a poetry that was somehow different from Marmion, which, with the capable assistance of Mr Glove, they had 'done' very thoroughly at school. Despite

Mr Glove's endeavours Nicky liked Scott's verse, finding it 'not so dry' as the prose of the Waverley Novels; and he shared with Hart a special affection for The Lay of the Last Minstrel, which, because Mr Glove had never been heard to mention it, they both greatly preferred to Marmion. Rhyme and metre, the more regular the better, he found immensely satisfying and exciting. 'The way was long, the wind was cold,'—this prologue he could recite, in private, from beginning to end, and he always remembered to say 'His tuneful brethren all were dead,' in spite of a natural tendency to put the 'all' in the wrong place. These memorizing feats were performed night by night in his little box of a bedroom, of which his father, who himself had had to share a bedroom for some forty years, had been so pleased to give him the sole possession. Learning verses while he undressed for bed helped to keep his mind off ugly fancies—derived from the tales of Poe—that had sometimes made going to bed a terror and going to sleep a thing to be fought against. He had good reason, then, for gratitude to Scott; but now he forgot that debt in the contracting of a new one. Sixpence, two weeks' pocket money, had bought for him, it seemed, the key of paradise itself: a little red-covered volume in Cassell's National

Library containing a selection from Tennyson. The wonder of that revelation! Marvellous that by adding word to word and line to line such music and such colour could be wrought! He was ripe for Tennyson, for Tennyson and no other. That pensive melancholy soothed his adolescent agitations; the smooth and shining verse carried his dreams upon its surface; and the story of King Arthur's death marched with trumpets in his mind. He suffered and exulted; his eyes shone for Mariana; he was a Lotus Eater, visiting the land 'in which it seemèd always afternoon'; in mournful rapture he waited for Maud in that scent-laden garden that might have been designed for him alone, so exactly did it match his mood. In time the glory of Tennyson waned, being eclipsed by a greater glory, a purer magic, Coleridge. When he came to this:

The moving moon went up the sky
And nowhere did abide,
Softly she was going up. . . .

at the third line he paused and listened, tasting a pure delight; and, like the tragic lovers of Dante's vision, he read no more that day.

These events, first Tennyson, then the Coleridge of The Ancient Mariner, were among the great

events of Nicky's adolescence. And this profoundly private life did not at all conflict with his life at school. He and his fellows of the Sixth experienced every enthusiasm proper to their age except an enthusiasm for learning. In the wake of tired Mr Stagg they ploughed three times through the sixth book of the Aeneid without ever being allowed to suspect that Virgil was anything more than a school text-book designed to exhibit the perversities of Latin syntax. Wim Beddo's having a strong commercial bias, Greek was no part of the curriculum; but Mr Beddo himself would engage to spoil Homer for you as effectually as Mr Stagg was spoiling Virgil, were your parents so eccentric as to have you take Greek instead of Shorthand or Book-keeping. But these things, at best, were not matters in which the boys themselves took any official interest. Nicky and his friends had more important things to think about: such things as marbles; bullseye-lanterns; conkers; top-spinning tournaments; keeping white mice, unseen but not imperceptible, in their school-desks; and school-magazines. In winter they derived much spiritual satisfaction from home-made hand-warmers: perforated cigarette-tins filled with glowing touch-wood; and at seasons the more imaginative spirits, greatly to the scorn of the Farringay Grammar

Sops, went daily to and from school bowling iron hoops which they called among themselves their steeds and discussed with high equestrian enthusiasm, strutting up and down the playground with 'skimmers' pendent from lapels or carried as riding-crops. Of all these epidemics, journalism was the most congenial to Nicky. His serial story, Scalpo the Head-hunter, gave great satisfaction, especially to its author, though it did not get further than the third instalment, which ended in this fashion: '"Ye feel hungry doubtless," said Scalpo, "but we have nought to offer ye I fear me, some of ye must come with me to find something." A loud murmur of approval greeted the Chief's speech, for he was a man of few words.'

With all these matters to occupy him, Nicky paid little attention to the daily misery of his father's married life. He was aware of it rather as a pervading atmosphere than as an active poisoner of happiness. He was sorry for his father, but he had never taken the final step in sympathy of getting imaginatively into his father's shoes. From this ultimate pain he was protected by Egg himself, who, for his own sake as well as for the boy's, revealed always his sunniest side to Nicky, being heartily grateful to have someone near him who

was not visibly oppressed by the shadow in the house.

4

Nicky paused on the landing to listen to his mother's voice. He was reluctant to approach her door.

'Yes, Mother. All right. I'll tell him.'

He went downstairs and entered the little, permanently crowded parlour. Even when it was empty of people it was crowded. The chairs and tables and vases and lustres and even the great cabbage roses on the wall—these were a sufficient host. Nicky stood undismayed in the midst of this lumber.

'Mother's dying again,' he remarked.

Egg responded with a tut-tutting noise. 'That's not the way to speak of y'r mother, my boy! I'm surprised at you. Does she want me?'

'Yes. Told me to tell you,' mumbled Nicky, in confusion.

His confusion was occasioned partly by his father's rebuke, but more by the fact—which he had only just noticed—that the room contained Harold and a stranger. Worse than that, the stranger was a young woman.

Egg said: 'Come along, my boy. Come and say

how d'ye do to Miss Colebrook. She won't bite you.'

Nicky, covered in blushes, stumbled forward and shook hands with Miss Colebrook, Harold watching the ceremony with an uneasy, half-derisive grin. And Egg, modelling himself for a moment on his brother Algernon, who had a word for every occasion, forced himself to add that Lily was to be one of the family. 'Sister for you, my boy. . . . Well, I must go and see what Mother wants.'

So that was it! That was the meaning of this strangely formal gathering in the parlour: Harold had gone and got engaged. And this was what an engaged couple looked like. Nicky's glance, shyly curious, wavered from one face to the other. The girl looked pretty and defiant, and Harold looked sheepish. Now what was the proper thing to say to them? Nicky could think of nothing except his wish to get away.

'Well, if you'll excuse me . . . promised to meet a chap down Coppice this evening.'

But still he lingered, and at this moment a queer thought entered his mind and would not be expelled; and, as if in answer to that queer thought, Selina, the subject of it, abruptly entered the room.

'I expect the lady ud like a cup of tea, wouldn't she, 'Arold?'

A cup of tea at half past six o'clock—why? Harold, staring, gaping, managed to say: 'Thanks very much. Spect she would.'

The moment he had spoken, by the curl of Selina's lip and the blazing of her eyes Harold knew, Nicky knew, perhaps the astonished Lily half-knew, that he had fallen into the crudest trap. Selina waited, her eyes fixed on Harold, making the most of this her last moment. 'Would she reely now, Harold darling! Then she can jest set about getting it 'erself. See? And not in my kitchen neither. See?'

Selina was gone, leaving havoc behind her; and at the same moment Egg returned from his visit upstairs. 'Nicky, you run off to the doctor. Your mother's not so well to-night. Say Mr Pandervil's compliments and will he please come round soon's he can.'

Egg's voice was calm and unhurried. He had lived through too many of these crises to have credulity to spare for this one. His wife in a weary sighing voice had said: 'I think I'm going to die, Eggie!' And he had answered patiently: 'Very well, my dear. I'll send for the doctor.' An answer quite innocent of irony, as of unkindness, and one he had made, on like occasions, a score of times before. True, he was anxious; but anxiety

had become his normal state, and he was not too much preoccupied to say civil things to Lily, who now, eager and agitated, rose to say she must go.

She went, and Harold with her. Egg was left alone with his thoughts. But he preferred his newspaper, which he had been too busy to read properly during the day. It was not the exciting reading it had been a year or two before, during the Boer War; but, what with this and that and the other, there was always some odd little thing happening. Egg took pleasure in the odd little things, preferring them to murders and divorces and what Mr Balfour said about Tariff Reform. 'That plaintiff's dog had eaten his artificial teeth was the allegation made by John Tweed, warehouseman, 37, of 229B Maiden Avenue, Camberwell, yesterday at the Old Bailey when charged with alleged assault with intent to cause grievous bodily harm to Henry Westerman, bank clerk, 29 . . .' This was the sort of thing that took a man's mind off his troubles; it was better than the serial story, because it set you thinking and making up ridiculous stories of your own, and better far than the pompous leading articles which could not in less than a column contrive to call the other side an ass.

'Doctor's out, Dad.' It was Nicky come back.

'Leave a message?' asked Egg.

'Yes. Expect him any minute, they said.'

'Good boy,' said Egg. 'Done your homework?' Nicky shook his head. 'Cut along and do it then. What is it to-night?'

'Algebra and Latin. Oh, and French.'

Egg stared his admiration. 'All that! Ah, you know a deal too much for me, Nicky. Capes of Europe and nine square feet one square yard was as far as ever *I* got. Off you go now, or it'll be bedtime before you start.'

Egg returned to his newspaper. He wished the doctor would come, and so relieve him of this carefully suppressed uneasiness, this little aching sense of responsibility. He was not really alarmed: by this time he knew better than to take his wife's melodrama seriously; but he wished the doctor would come. Not alarmed, because if there was one thing certain in this world it was that Carrie would outlast him, just as her mother had outlasted the old man. Tough as pig iron these Noom women were, in spite of what they told you! Old Mother Noom, who at Carrie's age should have been dead three times over according to her own account, went on till well past eighty, and would be going strong still, thought Egg, if she hadn't chanced to fall downstairs. One of his clearest

memories was of Mrs Noom's first deathbed scene, when she had frightened everyone in the house, her poor little husband most of all, by declaring that her end was at hand, and Egg himself, not much more than a boy at the time, he thought, had had to read a bit of the Bible to her. Carrie, thank heaven, had never played tricks like that; but Carrie was her mother's daughter all the same, and knew well, none better, how to make the most of such pains as she had. Carrie was ill now: not a doubt of that. But had she been as well as well, you'd a never got her to admit it, she was that stubborn, like as if she was afraid of losing the advantage of you. Tearing her insides about with those dratted pills didn't do her any good if you ask me, muttered Egg, conducting an argument in his mind with some second self. But she *would* take 'em, he insisted, disclaiming responsibility; again and again, no matter what *I* said. Might jest as well have talked to a post, I might. If I'd a had *my* way there'd never have been any need for sech things; but there it is, no use grumbling. . . . He wished the doctor would come. He looked at his watch, which told him that more than an hour had passed since his visit to Carrie. Better go and have a look, he thought; and with the thought came a picture of the bedroom in which Carrie was now

lying, the very bedroom and the very bed in which her mother had feigned death and her father had died, containing the same yellow wardrobe, the same ottoman, the same ugly and everlasting chest of drawers so placed as to exclude such little light as the window admitted. Egg let drop his newspaper. Better go and cheer her up a bit till the doctor comes.

As soon as he entered the room he knew himself alone in it. Something, some queer difference, told him that what the bed contained was no longer Carrie. He moved forward on his toes with the sensation of treading in a void. The silence of the room deafened him. He knew; and yet when, as he stared into that face, the words formed in his mind she is dead she is dead, it was as if he had not known until this dread revealing moment. She can't be dead, not Carrie . . . not dead! This was Carrie, and deep-rooted habit would not let him think of her as dead. In a moment that glassy look would fade from the staring eyes, and Carrie would say something to him, something tart no doubt, but what did that matter? Anything was better than nothing; anything was better than this violent wrench at the mind, this cruel sudden assault on a habit that had grown into him and become part of himself. He put out a trembling

hand and touched her. But it was useless to fight; the new habit was gaining strength; he resisted it no longer, but prayed that he might be given courage to close the eyes before young Nicky had a chance of seeing them and reading in them the universal doom . . . and when this had been accomplished it was as if Carrie lay sleeping, a younger Carrie utterly and coldly at peace. Egg, awe-struck by this specious dignity, turned his face away, remembering the young girl she had once been, and how, downstairs in the kitchen, he had kissed her for the first time. Memories crowded in upon him, but though as he moved to the door his lips were saying soundlessly Poor Carrie poor Carrie, the grief that surged in him was not for Carrie, not for himself, but for something he knew not what.

He tiptoed downstairs calling softly: 'Nicky! Nicky my boy.'

An irrational agitation seized him. He must call someone, he must get help, he must give the alarm. What foolishness, he thought the next instant. There's no help now, and no hurry. And at the realization that never again would there be any hurry on Carrie's account, an immense burden was lifted from his life; yet at this moment he would have given anything to have that burden back in

exchange for the new one he had just acquired.

Nicky met him at the foot of the stairs. 'Yes, Dad?'

'It's your mother,' said Egg. He put a hand on Nicky's shoulder to steady himself, and sat down on the lowest stair, bowing his head.

'What's the matter, Dad? Mother bad?'

'She's dead, my boy. I feel . . . a little poorly.'

Nicky stared at the bald patch on his father's head, and tried to understand what he had heard. It meant that there was a dead body in the house. He shuddered, and tears welled into his eyes. A big fellow now, close on fifteen; but he was frightened, and the sight of his father stricken and bowed thrust sharply at his heart. To comfort and be comforted he fell on his knees and put his arms round Egg's neck, and in the warmth of that embrace the same thought came to each: What if it had been you! For a few moments they remained so, clinging desperately to all they possessed.

CHAPTER THE SECOND

PLANS AND HOPES

I

The doctor appointed by the City and Provinces Bank to examine candidates for their service was a tall, lantern-jawed gentleman of forty. When he had finished with Nicky he cleared his throat, shook his head, and remarked: 'I'm afraid . . . I'm rather afraid . . . not very robust . . . open-air life.' So saying he seized each of the two Pandervils by an arm and marched them towards the door. At the door he warmly shook hands with them both. 'Good day! Good day!'

Nicky and Egg walked down the street. Egg was bewildered. 'What's the meaning of that, Nicky? It's beyond me.'

'It means,' said Nicky, 'that I'm not brawny enough to be a bank clerk, Dad. Did you notice how upset he was when he took my chest measurement?'

'But bless my soul . . .'

Seeing that Egg was taking the disappointment to heart, Nicky attempted gaiety. 'Ah, you don't

understand, Dad. Jolly strenuous life in a bank. Takes a chap with big biceps to add up figures all day. You ought to hear what old Hart says. He says the mere sight of a ledger makes him tired. That just shows you.'

His father ignored these remarks. 'It's a real worry, that's what it is. Here's me been and given you a good education, better than your brothers by a long chalk, and now it's all to be wasted as I see things. Not robust enough! Not robust enough to sit on your bottom in an office all day. What's the donkey *mean?* I never heard such a thing.'

'It's the widows, Dad,' explained Nicky.

Egg looked across. He stared. 'What's *widows* to do with it?'

'The widows and orphans. My little lot. You didn't know I'd got any, did you? No more did I. But *he* knows, that doctor johnny knows. He has to think of everything, don't you see? And if I die young, muscular strain or something, they've got my widows on their hands.'

'Such a nice safe profession 'twould a bin,' said Egg sadly. 'Money goes on just the same even when you're ill. Now I've never bin ill. Not to *say* ill. Couldn't afford it. . . . I'm sure I don't know what to do with you. I'm fair beaten.'

Not to anyone else would Egg have admitted

himself 'fair beaten'; and a year ago he would not have admitted it even to Nicky. But he was conscious nowadays of being not quite the man he had been. He was nearing seventy; looking back it seemed to him that all his life he had been consistently denied whatever he had at any time chanced to set his heart on, and at last his stock of patience had run out. Whatever he wanted he must have now or never; there wasn't much time left. Above all things he wanted to see Nicky comfortably settled in a good safe job, and married—if that wasn't too much to hope—to the right kind of girl. If I can only last another ten years, thought Egg, I can see the boy launched in the world. Nicky was now seventeen: a wonderful age, a dangerous age, thought the old man, who remembered something—not very much but something—of his own young manhood spent in Mershire on his father's farm. Why, I couldn't a bin moren twenty three or four when I left home. It was true; nevertheless he felt that he had never been really young after leaving Mershire, after that cruel bit of a love affair of his. Ignorant and raw perhaps, but not young. He had forgotten much of that affair, and he could not for the life of him remember the girl's face; but he remembered how, after her going, the beauty of his

native shire had been an intolerable burden to him, every responsive pulse of joy being turned instantly to pain by the agony of recalling the heaven he had lost. The air caressed him with her hands; birds called with her voice; a starlit sky, with the great moon moving up, was become but a cruel counterfeit of hours shared with her in the orchard. The very sunlight had stabbed at him with intimations of a vanished glory, so that his heart was an inexhaustible fountain of pain. . . . It was very different now, very dim and far away, as though it had all happened to someone else. He no longer felt the emotion: he remembered it, as one remembers an old tale. And he hoped with all his heart that Nicky would be luckier than ever he had been. This rheumatism had worried him increasingly of late; it had shortened his temper and caused him twinges of fear as well as pain. He could not bear the idea of dying yet, with Nicky only seventeen. That girl he had loved, she would be an old lady now, white-haired, feeble perhaps, or perhaps dead; and with this thought the feeling came to Egg Pandervil that he himself had lived too long. The show was over for him, and all his friends were gone. Pummice gone, Farthing gone, old Miss Hunt of the Post Office gone; and the High Street thronged with strange faces. Every

death had brought his own end nearer in imagination, Carrie's most of all; and every death, even Carrie's at first, had made life a little less worth living. These bustling young people—he was out of touch with them. Even Nicky was more reserved with him than he had been as a child.

Carrie's death had shaken Egg and changed him; that change was still going on, and he had not yet grasped all its meaning. He had freedom at last, but to what end? Freedom to read the newspaper without fear of interruption from upstairs, that was what it amounted to. The incomparable gift had come too late: he was used up, worn out. And the new habit was difficult to learn: it demanded unceasing vigilance. Many a time during those first weeks he was shaken with surprise to find the bedroom empty when he entered it at night; and, waking in the early morning, it was strange, not to hear Carrie's loud breathing, strange not to be compelled to listen, with quivering nerves, to the singing kettle in Carrie's nose. How he had hated that sound! In retrospect he hated it still, but he was none the less discomforted by its absence. He began to think that it was this house that oppressed him, and to toy with vague impossible plans for getting away from it. But were they so impossible? Harold was now a

competent enough grocer, and willing, it seemed, to marry and settle down.

'Open-air life he said, didn't he?'

'Who?' Nicky emerged from a reverie.

'That doctor. Said you ought to have an open-air life.'

'Believe he did.'

'Might do worse than farming,' suggested Egg tentatively.

'Umph!' Nicky was unresponsive.

'Used to be mad about it when you were a little chap,' said Egg. 'Always asking me about the farm, you were. Pigs an' geese, eh? '

'I don't know,' said Nicky. 'It's all right, I suppose.'

'Well, is there anything else you wanta do?' Egg spoke patiently, hiding his disappointment. 'Anything in y'r mind?'

Nicky wondered whether this was the moment for speaking about that half-finished epic locked in his desk at home. He decided it was not. 'No. Haven't thought much about it. I always supposed it would be a bank or something. Wants thinking over, doesn't it? I don't know.'

'Of course,' admitted Egg, 'farming needs capital. . . . And I haven't got any capital,' he added thoughtfully. 'Not likely. P'raps y'r

Uncle Algy'll be able to suggest something. He's full of ideas, he is. Always was.'

'He'll want to make an auctioneer of me,' said Nicky. 'I'd rather not, if you don't mind.'

'Wonderful how he goes on, y'r Uncle Algy. A tidy bit older than me, y' know. And a martyr to gout these *five* years. How'd it be to run over and see him, Nicky?'

Nicky looked at his father without replying. Egg, reading that look, felt his heart sink within him; for it was evident that the boy did not share this fancy of his for farming. The wonder of it, the magic, the bridge across half a century of wasted time—Nicky was blind to this.

'Of course'—Egg shrugged his shoulders—'you must do as you like, my boy. No good putting you to something you hate. I know that well enough.'

Nicky was silent. And his father could not bring himself to say more. Without speaking they turned into a cheap restaurant and ordered poached eggs on toast. A battle was raging in Nicky's heart; he wanted to cry. Presently he remarked, in as easy a tone as he could muster: 'I daresay farming'll be rather a lark, once I get to know a bit about it. What do you think, Dad?'

2

With Nicky away the house was quiet indeed; and the ghost of Nicky—for Nicky was now learning to farm under the guidance of a Mershireman named Crabbe—replaced that of Carrie. For Egg the experience was almost in its effect a suspension of life, a pause between two periods, an empty transition from the existence he had known to something as yet unguessed that was to follow. He was waiting for this something to happen. Meanwhile he became extravagantly interested in the movements of the postman, and cherished his son's letters like a lover. Marvellous letters they seemed to him, and full of a quality that he called 'litry genius'. He chuckled delightedly over Nicky's schoolboyish, exuberant descriptions of Farmer Crabbe, and Mrs Crabbe, and of his fellow-pupil, a taciturn young man named James. He cherished a wonderful plan for paying Nicky a visit once this tiresome business of Harold and Lily should have been settled.

The hostility between Lily Colebrook and Selina Bush became open—a domestic scandal. Egg was reluctantly aware of it. 'Now my boy, you and me must have a bit of a talk.'

Harold stared at his boots. 'All right, Dad.'

'Don't like the look of things, I don't. Sleena's

been behaving very queerly about you and Lily. Very queerly indeed she has. What's the meaning of it?'

'Better ask *her*,' mumbled Harold. 'It's a bit thick, if you ask me, the way she goes on about us. Lily says it's time she went about her business.'

'Indeed?' Egg's voice was gently sarcastic. 'That's what your Lily says, is it. And maybe she's her reasons. Yes, my boy, and maybe Sleena's *her* reasons for behaving as she does. I'm not a blind bat, let me tell you. Nor an old fool neither.'

Harold grew red. 'Don't know what you mean, Dad.'

'Well,' said Egg, at once plaintive and exasperated, 'Sleena didn't *use* to behave like that. What's come over her? . . . Now tell me straight, Harold. I want to know. Has there been anything going on between Sleena and you?'

'Course not!' answered Harold limply, with the feeblest show of indignation and surprise. 'Oh what's the good of talking about all that now.'

'No good at all in lies,' said Egg sternly, 'if that's what you mean.' He was profoundly wretched. His voice trembled. 'How long has this been going on?'

But he hardly listened to Harold's answer. It

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was drowned by the tumult within him. Such treachery, such wickedness, and in his own house! Was it not enough to break an old man's heart to discover such rottenness in his son? Yes indeed it was. The teaching of the Reverend Shadrach Pierce left him in no doubt of that. What had he done to deserve such a son! 'It's a mercy your poor mother didn't live to hear of this!' Harold, hanging his head, made no reply; and Egg's anger spent itself silently against that silence. In a few minutes he had sounded, in quick succession, the whole gamut of appropriate reactions: from primitive excitement, prudish horror, moral indignation and social alarm, to intelligent understanding. And, resolutely turning his back on the shade of Shadrach Pierce, who would have persuaded him that this son of his was doomed to suffer everlasting hellfire, he summed up his final thought on the matter by saying: 'Time you got married, my lad, that's what it comes to!' Crimson to the ears, Harold agreed. 'Anyhow,' he blurted out, 'it wasn't any fault of Sleena's, Dad! Don't go blaming her!' And Egg, in his misery, took comfort from this small sign of grace in the sinner.

A campaign was set afoot for making an honest man of Harold. A formidable task, but not an impossible one. Egg shouldered the responsibility

with energy: the more readily, perhaps, because he vaguely foresaw that it hastened the day of his release from Farringay. His first and last difficulty was with Lily Colebrook, who suddenly, finding herself the centre of attention, decided that she wouldn't marry Harold, not on any account she wouldn't.

'And quite right too!' said Egg severely. 'You don't deserve a good girl like Lily. Better look round for somebody else.' But repenting of his severity—for Harold, at twenty-eight, seemed pitifully immature to him—he asked: 'Are you really fond of her, my boy?' It was on the tip of his tongue to ask another and a more searching question, for he was troubled by the fear that this young man, cheap all through, knew nothing of love's heights. 'Are you really fond of her, or is it . . .' But he left it at that, and even so, seeing Harold's confusion, did not stay for an answer. 'Because if you do, I daresay she'll forgive you.'

'She says she hates me,' said Harold. 'She says why don't I marry Sleena.'

'Marry Sleena!' cried Egg, up in arms. 'What the devil next! Not but what you ought to, in a way,' he hastily added, blushing for his violence. 'But marriage is a long business. It's no good rushing it. And I won't have my son marrying

any Sleenas, and that's flat.' To whom did he address this defiance? Not, surely, to Harold, who cannot be suspected of an eagerness to marry Selina. And not to Lily Colebrook, whose innocent piece of rhetoric Egg perfectly understood. Perhaps it was to Farringay: to all the folks who knew him as a commonplace grocer and knew not that his father had been gentle.

And now that he had started this benevolent meddling he found that he must go on with it. It became his fixed idea that Harold must be married —if possible to Lily Colebrook; if not, to some other nice girl. His dream was that the pair of them should take over control of the shop, leaving him free to follow the devices and desires of his own heart. These desires pointed all in one direction—Nicky; and the picture of Nicky was doubly attractive because it was now framed in Mershire. Egg fancied himself living snugly in a little cottage, with Nicky either sharing it (and going to and from his work as a farm-hand) or, married to some wholesome pretty country wench, living within easy distance. Although his own experience of marriage had been an unhappy one he never doubted nowadays that Nicky's wife would be a treasure, a perpetual delight to her husband, a solace to her father-in-law, and a wise mother to

her family of boys and girls. Egg had already, you might say, chosen Nicky's wife for him; such a wife as he, Egg, would perhaps have chosen for himself had he his time over again; a tall, deep-bosomed, generously proportioned girl, with music in her speech and kindness in her heart; a girl not unlike the girl his own mother, Elizabeth, must once have been, and still more like someone he had known a lifetime ago whose face he had forgotten but whose personal quality—some exquisite essence more subtle than the smell of roses—pervaded, like a breath, certain moments that still recurred in his life at intervals, moments of stillness and perplexed wonder, a mystery of which he had long since lost the key. That he might one day live within reach of this son and this son's wife, and take pleasure in the sight of his grandchildren, was now the old man's dearest hope, in pursuit of which he quite forgot to consider the problem of what was to become of Selina: all his plans were based on the unconscious and absurd assumption that Selina would remain where she was. Selina was peculiarly dependent on these Pandervils; she had never known another home than theirs except the home provided for her in infancy by a philanthropist named Barnardo.

For three days Lily Colebrook maintained a

stern silence. Then necessity—aided, perhaps, by irresolution—sent her to buy groceries at Pandervil's Stores. Harold might be a scoundrel, but that was no reason why Lily's poor mother should be deprived of her bacon for breakfast, was it? And though there were other grocers' shops in Farringay she did not recall the fact until too late. Besides, it would serve Harold right to be forced to hand her a pound of rashers, politely, across the counter, and to see her eyes studiously avoiding his. It would show him how utterly indifferent she was. All things considered, we must allow a hundred good reasons for Lily's calling at Pandervil's Stores, and not a single one against that enterprise. Perhaps Egg was shrewd enough to divine how her mind worked, for he hadn't, we must suppose, lived seventy years with his eyes shut; and perhaps he knew that the sight of himself behind the counter—where Harold was so often to be found—was something of a shock to the girl. He could not forbear to glance at her with amused, twinkling eyes, though he veiled their light the moment after with a look of sympathetic consideration. She was, after all, a very young thing; young, and proud, and to Egg's mind pathetic. He half-wished her a better husband than Harold seemed likely to prove, yet he wished Harold to

have her and love her and falsify his dismal forebodings.

'Well, Lily?'

'Good evening, Mr Pandervil. A pound of Mother's rashers, if you please.'

'Certainly, my dear.' There was a touch of gallantry as well as solicitude in his smile. 'Now I was hoping you might pay us a visit.' Lily did her best to look sullen, but succeeded only in looking wistful. 'Because,' went on Egg, after a silence, 'I wanted to have a little talk with you.'

Lily met his glance timidly. 'Did you, Mr Pandervil?'

'I did,' said Egg.

You might have supposed, by his demeanour, that Mr Pandervil had reached the conclusion of the whole matter. He closed his lips tightly and addressed himself to the task of cutting slices of bacon as though there were no more to be said. But when the mounting pile of rashers at last turned the scale he placed his long knife carefully beside them, and remarked, a trifle too cheerfully: 'So you've sent my young scamp about his business, have you Lily?'

'Meaning Harold?' asked Lily superflously, her cheeks a deep scarlet.

'Meaning Harold,' agreed Egg, with but the

faintest inflection of irony in his tone. He leaned on his elbows across the counter. 'And you've done right, my dear. He's got what he deserves, and that's nothing. Leastways not a good wife. He doesn't deserve that, not by a long way. A good-for-nothing idle lout, that's what he is; and he'll come to a bad end, depend upon it. You're well rid of him, Lily Colebrook.'

The girl stared in surprise at this prodigious parent, so ruthless in judgment of his son.

'He's a fair misery about the house nowadays,' resumed Egg, after a meditative silence. 'Moping and moping and not a word to say. As for appetite, the mere sight of food makes him *sick*, by the look of it. And serve him right, I say, for he's a perfect scandalous disgrace. He's brought it all on himself by his own wickedness and he'll get no sympathy from me. If I was a younger man I'd take a stick to him I would.'

Lily studied to conceal whatever of consternation she may have been feeling; but it is certain that she had never before seen the mild Mr Pandervil in such a towering rage. In Farringay he was accounted a genial old fellow, for a new generation had grown up knowing nothing of the story of how Mr Pandervil had hurled his own wife's mother into a cab, or of that other story,

better authenticated, of how he had punched the nose of a glossy gentleman who had kindly offered to buy his business from him. Lily knew him only as a highly respected deacon of the Ebenezer Chapel, and as the father of her errant Harold.

'Mind you,' said Mr Pandervil, 'I won't say there's not the *making* of a man in him, if some good girl was to take him in hand. He's got an affectionate nature, and he'd learn, he'd learn. But who,' asked Mr Pandervil indignantly, 'who would have anything to say to such a young rip! Not you, Lily. It's too great a sacrifice.' Mr Pandervil dismissed the subject with a sigh, and turning to the rashers of bacon, as for comfort, he wrapped them in grease paper and slipped them into a paper-bag on which was printed *Pandervil for Purity Value and Fair Dealing*. He paused, for perhaps the ten thousandth time, to regret that flamboyant inscription, in respect of which, though he privately thought it vulgar, he had allowed himself to be overruled by its author, his brother Algernon. Quite a balloon of a fellow now, having for many years waxed fat in prosperity and geniality, Algy still paid an occasional welcome visit to his younger brother, 'dear old Eggie'. And on the last such occasion but one—three years ago, just before poor Minnie took and died—he had set

about bringing Egg's business methods up to date. 'Pandervil for Purity—that goes well, boy! Glad I thought of that. Nice little bit of allitration. Pandervil for Purity—I should just think so indeed! That'll fetch 'em. And Value and Fair Dealing, that means they're getting their money's worth, and a bit over. A bit over, Eggie old son, hey? Here, gimme a spare bag, will you, and I'll get this little affair sketched out. Like this.' He sucked his pencil thoughtfully, staring into distance at his visionary design before committing it to black and white. 'How'd it be to say "the original Farringay grocer" or "the shop your grandmother patronized?" No?' Another pause. The artist is in labour with his creation. Then he rises to his feet, his eyes sparkle. 'I've got it, Eggie! By George I've got it. Pandervil for Purity, Value, and Fair Dealing. The man that put the gay in Farringay. . . . What d'you say to that, my boy!' Egg tried to conceal his alarm; but he need not have bothered, for Algy was in no mood to observe it. 'I don't somehow think that last bit'll do, Algy. Nothing very gay about grocery after all. Besides people wouldn't quite like the sound of it.' Algy, on the point of looking offended, checked himself and cried with a laugh: 'Ah, boy, trouble with you is you've no imagination. The best fellow in the

world, Eggie, but no imagination old man. And no jolly old GO, if you see what I mean. As for nothing gay about grocery, well why not, that's my answer to that. Whose fault is it, Eggie? Not mine, old boy, I assure you. 'Pon my word, no. If I'd *my* way this little shop of yours 'ud be the brightest little spot in Farringay.' Egg, unable to bear his brother's disappointment, broke out into praises of the earlier part of the scripture. 'That's an idea, Algy, that is. But as for the gay part—honestly I'm afraid of it. My deacons, y'know, they'd think it a bit on the fast side.' Algy, warm with friendliness and self-approbation, wagged his head sagaciously. 'Know what you mean, old man. Concubines and such. I know the kind of thing, trust me. . . . Well well, I'm not one to take offence. You know that. We'll leave it at Pandervil for Purity, as you say. Though I don't mind telling you, Eggie, that to my way of thinking that last bit's the best of all. Never mind. Never mind. I won't say another word about it.' One sees the frustrated man struggling not to say another word about it. His face was sombre for perhaps half a minute. Then, heroically, he remarked with an effort: 'Pandervil for Purity—why, old man, that'll be worth fifty pun a year to you, or I'm a Dutchman.' Egg gasped with relief

to be let off so lightly. 'Yes, Algy, a good notion, that was. Glad you thought of it.' Whereupon Algy was quite himself again. 'Oh I get these little ideas, y'know,' he said airily, dismissing the trifle with a nod. 'They just sort of pop into my nut, y'know.'

Egg, counting out Lily Colebrook's change, recalled how very different Algernon's demeanour had been on his subsequent visit. Poor old Algy, he thought, 'twas a terrible blow to him when Min went. And swift on that thought followed another: It'll be my turn soon . . . But resolutely shaking free of his reverie he remembered Lily Colebrook and his errand with her. 'What I intend to do, my dear, is just this. He shall have what he deserves, Harold shall. And since *you* won't have him I'll make him do the right thing by Sleena.'

Lily's mouth fell open in alarm. 'Not marry her, Mr Pandervil! You'll not let him marry her!'

'Let him! Let him!' cried Mr Pandervil, with a laugh that was almost sinister. 'I'll *make* him, that's what I'll do. The lad's made his bed and he must lie on it.' With the words out of his mouth he became suddenly afflicted by a sense of their possible indelicacy, and had to seek sanctuary in a fit of coughing, after which he reiterated his

decision and added serenely: 'And a wretched life he'll have of it, you may be sure, my dear.' Nodding at her grimly he turned away and retired to the back of the shop.

He listened gravely, two days later, to Harold's excited confidences. 'She's changed her mind, Dad.'

'Has she indeed! Now which way is it this time, Harold? She's changed her mind so often, I've lost count.'

'She's . . . forgiven me. She'll have me.' With a flicker of complacency he added: 'I thought I'd manage somehow to bring her round.'

'Ah, you're a clever lad, Harold!' said his father; and seeing the boy wince under his lash he went on quickly: 'Well, we'd better get the bells ringing before she changes her mind again, eh?' He began unfolding some of his plans. 'I suppose you and Lily'd be content to carry on the shop here, wouldn't you?'

Harold met him with a puzzled face. 'What about you? Not feeling ill or anything, are you?'

'Never mind about me, my boy. I'm not going to die if that's what you mean. Leastways not before my time comes. But suppose I wanted a bit of a change, country air and so on, would you and Lily take over the business from me?'

For a few minutes they discussed ways and means. But Harold abruptly ended the discussion by blurting out: 'And what's to happen about Sleena?'

Misunderstanding him, Egg answered: 'As to that, we'll let bygones be bygones.'

'Yes, but *she* won't,' said Harold, rather impatiently. 'Sleena won't. Nor will Lily, I daresay. Can't have Sleena in the house with us, can we now!'

Egg's face fell. 'I never thought of that.'

'You see what I mean?' said Harold.

Egg nodded. 'This'll need thinking over. Funny thing, it never once came into my head. But it certainly *is* a difficulty.'

The thought of this difficulty induced a kind of fever in him as the days went by. Impatient to put his plans into effect, he could brook no delay. He began to cast sidelong anxious glances at Selina, vexing himself with the thought of her stubborn resolution to make trouble if she could. Sometimes he came near to hating her, but an inconvenient sense of justice intervened to remind him that her malice, though deplorable and wicked and a nuisance, was not a thing to be wondered at. Perhaps even in this salutary reflection, which he encouraged by way of self-admonition, there was a

touch of pious make-believe; for indeed he did marvel, always had marvelled, at the spectacle of human malice, which, as he might have told you in a moment of intimate confidence, didn't after all seem to make anybody much happier. He tried to harden his heart against Selina, but the attempt did not avail. Frequently, when she was not looking, he shot at her a scowling glance that was in effect a malediction; but he didn't seriously entertain the possibility of turning her adrift. His house had sheltered her too long for that, and, now that he came to think about it, he discovered in himself a proprietary affection for her. He liked her—tiresome as she now was, and ugly in her new mood—because she was dependent on him, because in a quiet and more than half unconscious fashion she had been loyal to him, and good to his children, through more than one domestic crisis, and because —well, because, simply, he was used to seeing her about the place. He brooded, sometimes anxiously, sometimes wrathfully; but he could not escape the fact that somehow or other she had got to be taken into account. He couldn't just say: 'Look you here, Sleena, Harold and Lily are getting married, and I'm afraid you'll have to take a month's notice. Of course if you want a reference—well I'll say all I can for you, my girl.' He tried this over, this

eminently reasonable and sensible speech, and instantly recognized it as baseness and treachery; for it was his profound conviction—which he had never tried to express in words—that in this world of mortal creatures all unkindness is a sort of treachery, and he sometimes wondered if even God himself could be quite so unkind as his fellow-Ebenezerites believed. Into his perplexed mind there flashed at last the beacon thought of Mabel Finch, his depressed, middle-aged, prolific daughter, the wife of a cadaverous fishmonger considerably her senior, and the mother of (so far) five children, whose noses not the fondest grandfather in the world could have regarded with unmixed pleasure. Following the gleam of his new idea, he paid a rare visit to Albert Avenue.

Mabel, I don't know why, had become conspicuously ample in her person. She was not, her neighbours fancied, very happy in her marriage; and her temperament did not match her appearance. Her figure was of the build called 'comfortable', the figure that goes with a bright eye and a bustling cheerful manner. But Mabel, if she bustled at all, bustled drearily; her eyes were tired; and though she rarely uttered a word of complaint, having better uses for such energy as was left to her, her voice was always complaining.

She had become, by reason of her altered appearance and diminishing appetite for quarrelling, even more of a stranger to her father than she had been during her mother's lifetime. He could hardly, poor man, believe that he and no other had begotten her. The sight of her invariably saddened and humiliated him by quickening his sense of having, as a father, failed her. In her infancy he had been too ready to regard her as merely an appendage to Carrie and another potential cause of disagreement in the house, and that Carrie had consistently forced this attitude upon him was insufficient now to secure him an acquittal from his own tender conscience. He sometimes shamefacedly slipped half a sovereign into Mabe's hand at parting, for he guessed that she was kept short of money by her tippling husband; and he would have given a substantial sum, ill as he could spare it, had he had any confidence in its power to redeem her house from the squalid odour that filled it—an odour, pungent and nauseating, that floated across the threshold to meet him the moment Mabel, drearily hushing her children as she shuffled up the passage to admit him, opened the door six inches and vigilantly inserted her large nose in the narrow aperture. But Mr Pandervil was notoriously a bit of a crank about fresh air, being

one of those eccentric bodies who even in winter, and with no medical journalists to prompt them, slept with their bedroom windows visibly open. He was ashamed of so profoundly disliking the smell of his daughter's house; and, indeed, it was probably no worse than that of the others in her row.

'Why, it's Father! Come in, do.' A faint suggestion of pleasure tinged Mabe's colourless voice. And with a gallant attempt at brightness she added, mournfully: 'Quite a stranger!'

'Well, my dear.' Leaning awkwardly towards each other across the doorstep, father and daughter exchanged their customary peck. Then, with the unmistakable air of being glad the ritual was over, Egg entered the house hat in hand, driving—as it seemed—Mabel before him; for as he moved forward, eyeing the hat pegs desirously, she was forced back, there being not room enough for him to pass her. She was slow, as usual, and he in his nervousness was afflicted with a spasm of impatience, so that he trod on her toe and nearly stumbled.

'Beg pardon,' said Mabel, like a well-drilled child. 'Did I hurt you, Father?'

'Sorry!' said Egg. 'My fault.'

'Are you sure I dint hurt you, Father?'

'No, no. Not a bit. What about your toe?'

'Oh, granted, I'm sure!' retorted Mabel politely. 'Let me take your 'at, Father.' The hat changed hands and was hung on a peg. It fell down and was hung up again. The third time it seemed likely to remain, but it was nervous work edging past the hall-stand, which shook dangerously if you bumped into it. The best way was to stand with your back pressed firmly against the opposite wall and slide along keeping your stomach contracted until the danger-point was passed. 'This *is* a narrow 'all!' admitted Mabel, with a sigh. ''Ardly worth *calling* an 'all, I always tell Dan. But it's nice for the children, isn't it?'

'Nice for the children?'

'A sort of cricket pitch for 'em,' explained Mabel. 'Dan says it don't do the paint any good. But I say let 'im 'ave the children to look after day in day out and 'e won't be so nice about a bit of paint.'

'Well it's not such a tight squeeze as it used to be anyhow,' ventured Egg, wishing that Mabe would move out of the way and let him sit down somewhere. 'When the pram used to be here,' he explained. As, at last, she backed into the parlour, and the journey's end was in sight, he recalled how that perambulator had had to be pushed back into

the kitchen every time a visitor appeared. A stupid arrangement he had always thought it, and so like poor Mabe.

'No, we've done with prams for a bit, thank 'eaven!' As though surprised by the feeling in her tone Mabel added apologetically: 'Though I dint ought to swear about it like that, did I? Come and sit down, do, Father. You must be tired, I'm sure, and you at your age.'

'Not a bit tired!' declared Egg. He sat down and began mopping his brow. 'Well, how's Daniel and the children, my dear?'

'Oh, mustn't grumble, time of the year,' said Mabel, sinking slowly into a chair. 'How's yourself, Father? I do 'ope,' she added plaintively, 'I do 'ope I dint 'urt you, Father, when I sort of tripped you up just now in the 'all.'

Egg approached his subject by way of Harold. 'Well, we shall be losing Harold soon now, I suppose.'

'Eh?' said Mabe. 'Has he been sickening?'

'Sickening for marriage,' said Egg curtly. 'Him and Lily's made up their minds at last, it seems.'

'A bit 'eadstrong, isn't it?' ventured Mabe. 'I never did 'old with doing things all in a flurry. Not a thing like getting married anyhow.'

'That's right enough.' Egg could not but

approve the sentiment, though he was aware that Mabe was being ridiculous. 'Still, two years is long enough for most folks to make up their minds in. And they've had nigh three, to my reckoning.'

'Well, I only 'ope it'll turn out for the best, I'm sure,' said Mabe, in her mortuary manner. 'But is 'Arold *earning* enough to get married on, Father?'

'I'm paying him enough, if that's what you mean.' In spite of his kindly intentions Egg was allowing his daughter's dismal airs to nettle him. 'He's got a head on his shoulders where business is concerned, that boy has. I never thought I'd live to say that of him, but fair's fair, as your poor mother used to say. He's brightened the shop up quite a deal, what with this and that.'

'Ah, you'll be sorry to lose 'im then.' Here, Mabe seemed to imply, here surely is a fit occasion for melancholy.

'Well, when I said lose him,' admitted Egg, confused, 'it was only a manner of speaking. Because of course he'll stay on where he is and keep the shop going for me. I'm not so young as I was, and I'll praps take things a bit quieter.'

'So you ought to, Father. I was saying to Dan only the other day: If anything was to happen to Father, I said——'

'Now see here, my girl!' Egg spoke with unwonted decision. 'Nothing's going to happen to me, so you can put that out of your mind. Nothing's going to happen to me except what happens to everybody sooner or later. If you mean die say die and have done with it—I never set up to be immortal, as I knows of.' First Harold, now Mabe, he thought angrily. Treat me like a child they do, with their silly hints. 'What I was wondering,' he went on, looking a little sheepish after his outburst, 'was whether you couldn't do with a bit of help about the house here.'

'No offence meant, I'm sure,' said Mabe, stiffly. 'I'm only too glad to 'ear you're all so prosperous. Only too glad, as any right-feeling person *would* be. Only one does 'ave to think a bit a'ead, and if Lily was to have any family, so to speak——' Mabe broke off self-consciously, and added after a moment's silence: 'Praps I dint ought to be talking like this, but plain speaking's my way, I'm afraid, and always was.'

Egg was on the point of saying that young people seemed to pick and choose a bit nowadays in this matter of parenthood; but one cannot discuss such matters with one's daughter, can one?—even though she *is* past forty and has five children. So he remarked instead: 'What I mean to say is,

there'll be Sleena to spare now if you could do with her. She'd be a help to you, wouldn't she?'

Mabe agreed, but without enthusiasm, that Sleena would be a help.

'Of course,' Egg said hastily, reading her mind, 'you wouldn't have to worry about paying her. We could see to that between us, somehow. Now Nicky's premium's paid things'll be getting easier year by year. Y'r Uncle Algy's bin very good. Nicky'll be earning his keep before long, and a bit over.'

'I don't 'ardly know what Dan'll say about it,' said Mabe. 'We don't always see eye to eye, and there's no use pretending we do. And besides . . .'

'Besides what?' Egg was anxious and rather irritable.

Mabe, having stared at what was in her mind for fifteen seconds, appeared to dismiss it with a shrug. 'Oh well, I daresay Sleena can look after 'erself. 'Tisn't as if she wasn't a *good* girl.'

Egg met her eye unflinchingly. 'Jusso!'

'It isn't,' insisted Mabe, 'as if Sleena wasn't a girl of good character, I mean.'

'So do I,' replied Egg shortly. 'She'd be all right that way.' He believed what he said, but the need for equivocation made him almost blush.

'But then,' said Mabe, dolefully, 'I don't sup-

pose she'd care about coming to 'elp me. It's no picnic, she'd better know that.'

'Set your mind easy.' Egg contrived to look at his daughter in an exceedingly knowing fashion.

'You think she'd like it . . .?'

'Well,' admitted Egg, 'she dint say in so many words she wanted to come to you. But I know pretty well what's in her mind.'

Egg's false exuberance got to his head; seeing success so near, he almost winked at Mabe. And when, that same evening, he set about executing the more difficult part of his plot he was armed not only with courage but with this new cunning that nature, as it seemed, had so unexpectedly and belatedly endowed him with.

He hovered about the scullery where Sleena was washing dishes. He knew from experience that this was the best place for conversation with Sleena. Elsewhere she would find endless occasion for jumping up and putting something or other 'to rights': here, engaged in washing up, she was spiritually tethered to her sink.

'My daughter Mrs Finch,' said Egg, chattily, 'she's not keeping up her strength the way I'd like to see.'

'Reelly, Mr Pandervil?' Selina made a sympathetic grimace, and her eyes shone with a com-

passion that was greedy for nourishing details of the distemper. 'Nothing serious, I 'ope.' Within her limitations Selina was a good-hearted young woman, and she wished Mrs Finch no harm. Yet there's something about a bad illness, isn't there?—it sort of makes a bit of a change and it's something new to talk about. It was self-denying of Selina to hope as she did.

'Yes, I'm very worried about it, Sleena; between ourselves, mind. She's too much to do, that's the fact of the matter. Rushed off her feet with those five children.' He spoke with feeling now as well as with calculation. Time had wrought an unconscious change in his point of view. Five children, in his young manhood, would have seemed to him a very moderate family indeed: now, in 1907, it seemed excessive for such folks as Mabe and Dan. 'It's too much work for one woman,' he concluded, cocking a meaning eye at his audience. 'She was saying to me yesterday what a comfort it'd be to have someone to give a hand—someone she knew and could depend on. It'd be a bit of company too. Now if only, she said, our Sleena could be spared—those were her very words.'

Selina, red with pleasure, could only say: 'Reelly, Mr Pandervil?'

'Yes,' said Egg, in an off-hand way, 'she thinks

very highly of you, does my daughter Mrs Finch. I don't know if you know it, but there it is.'

By a triumph of self-control he refrained from mentioning Harold's marriage. But, with these golden eggs laid, he could no longer resist taking private joy in the brood of happiness that time, he believed, must hatch from them. And, deacon though he was, and a constant if inaccurate bass in the Ebenezer Choir, he felt not the least compunction about having practised deception on these two women. Mabe, after all, would be the better for Selina's company and help; Harold and Lily would be the happier for her absence; and Selina herself would have been not unkindly disposed of. He had the happiness of all these folks genuinely at heart; but now he no longer disguised from himself the main motive of his scheming. That motive became more and more apparent as the weeks went by. These obstacles surmounted, he began to count the days to the wedding. So, too, we must suppose, did Harold; and so, we must hope, did Lily. These days of waiting were something of an ordeal for all three. Harold dreamed of Lily, and Lily of Harold; while Egg, with mounting excitement, kept telling himself that soon, if only for a few hours, he would be seeing Nicky again.

3

For her daughter's wedding party Mrs Colebrook—for the first time since her husband's funeral — unlocked the folding doors between parlour and drawing-room, and wound, not very hopefully, the large gilt ormolu clock that had been rich Uncle Eustace's wedding gift to herself half a lifetime ago. A fantastic thing she thought the clock, and she never ceased to reflect that the price of it would have paid for Lily's education. For twenty years, no less, it had stood silent on the drawing-room mantelpiece; but now, responding to her ministrations, it began ticking in a hearty, an almost nasal voice: a voice that to Mrs Colebrook's fancy, as she stood listening with the key of the clock in her hand, somehow suggested that of Uncle Eustace himself. It was a husky resonant throat-clearing note—tick tock, I'm a rich clock—and it conjured up so vivid a picture of red whiskers and bulging eyes and a vast striped waistcoat that Mrs Colebrook could not but believe for a moment that Uncle Eustace was alive again and standing in this very room with her. She had been both fond and afraid of Uncle Eustace: fond because he was good to her and because it was her nature to be fond, yet afraid, sometimes, of the greedy light

that shone in his little eyes when he looked as though he wanted to make a meal of her. She had never quite liked his clock; never since his death had she touched it, except with a duster, until now. It had stopped ticking soon after Uncle Eustace's heart had stopped beating, and now that it had started again she half-believed that he too had a new lease of life. Well Alice! And how's my little niece this morning? I've brought some butterscotch for you, ducky. Mrs Colebrook listened with eager horror to the voice issuing in her mind from the red whiskers; and she cast down her eyes, shuddering, lest she should meet the glance of a ghost; for Uncle Eustace was now so much more alive to her than was the alert young petty officer, her late husband, whose portrait smirked upon her from the drawing-room wall. 'Stuff and rubbidge!' said Mrs Colebrook, employing her favourite oath. She shook herself free of her fancies, and glancing up at George, as she moved to the window to let in some fresh air, she encountered a thought that had never presented itself before: that, whereas she always saw herself as a little younger than her husband, and a generation younger than Uncle Eustace, she was in fact at this moment a quarter of a century older than George had been when he died. Old enough to be

his mother, she muttered to herself, and she suddenly felt sick and weary and afraid of life. The clock in the drawing-room ticked with unction; the clock in the parlour ticked with discretion; and time went on, taking account of neither.

Here, in this double room, the wedding party assembled after the ceremony. It was a triumph for Mrs Colebrook that with so large a gathering there were yet seats for all but one. The party might have been designed as an illustration of the Church's Tables of Consanguinity; for everybody, it seemed, was in some degree or another everybody else's uncle, cousin, or aunt, or so Mrs Colebrook persuaded herself when she learned that Harold's grandfather, Richard Noom, had had an Uncle and Aunty Bunce; for Lily, too, had an Uncle and Aunty Bunce, 'and seeing it's the same name, Mr Pandervil, there must be some relationship somewhere, though it's not as if Bunce was what you'd call an uncommon name, and of course, it's not as if Uncle Bunce was her real uncle, though real enough since he married Dinah Colebrook, my own sister-in-law, who was with me, more's the mercy, when George was taken. And if Harold's grandfather's uncle should turn out to be no other than Lily's Uncle Bunce's grandfather, then Lily's Uncle Bunce would be your very own cousin, Mr

Pandervil; by marriage I mean, since you would have married Uncle Bunce's grandfather's niece's daughter.' This conclusion seemed to afford the greatest possible satisfaction to Mrs Colebrook: she declared that it was an omen; and the guests, pausing in their coterie conversations, listened so attentively that at length the silence embarrassed her and she looked up in confusion, her glance falling finally on the youngest of all the Bunces, a fair-haired pimply young man who hovered uneasily near the piano hoping that nobody would notice there was no seat for him. 'Why Sonny! Can't you find a chair, poor boy!' Mrs Colebrook's distress, and Sonny's gallant avowal that he'd rather stand, set all the men in the room in a state of perturbation. 'You sit here, young man, and let me have a stand for a bit!' The business of eating and drinking was seriously interrupted by this competition in courtesy. But it was Sonny's cousin Daise Hopper who put an end to the situation, and provoked approving laughter, by jumping up from the piano-stool and planting herself in her father's lap. There followed a further dispute, and by the time Sonny Bunce was prevailed upon to sit down the temperature of the room had risen so high that he was emboldened to say, with an arch grin: 'Needn't go over there, Daise. What's *my* knee

done?' The remark was a great success, and fully five minutes was occupied in enjoying it, those who had heard it repeating it for the benefit of those who hadn't, and being corrected, in their turn, by those who thought they had heard it more precisely. Several small arguments sprang up: Sonny Bunce saw himself already the subject of a legend; and finally, when a working agreement had been reached, and the text more or less established, the whole story had to be retailed, very slowly, into the ear of Aunty Bee, his mother, who suffered from deafness and had watched the excitement in a frenzy of impatience to be told what it was all about. After this, the serious business of the day began. Uncle Hopper proposed the health of the bride; Uncle Bunce proposed the health of the bridegroom; Uncle Albert proposed the health of the bride's mother. And then it was time for the Best Man to make a few remarks, but the Best Man, Nicky, was absent, and his deputy was shy. The speechmaking came to an end.

Egg, who sat conspicuous at Mrs Colebrook's side, smiled mechanically, his mind being occupied by one thought alone. Where's Nicky? He'd never be late without good reason: something must have happened. A series of pictures flashed across the screen of his mind: train wrecked, hideous con-

fusion, stretchers, illness, hospital wards. Without Nicky, even had these fears been quelled, the party was nothing: a mere noise interrupting his thoughts. He had the greatest difficulty in concealing his irritation. These people would go on chattering and laughing. Like a pack of monkeys, he muttered angrily. Looking up in response to a nudge, he encountered the reproachful gaze of Mrs Colebrook, and was abashed. Had she read his thoughts? Or, worse still, had he in his abstraction spoken them aloud? 'Beg pardon, Mrs Colebrook? Did you speak?'

'Why Mr Pandervil!' Mrs Colebrook's manner was become so girlish, her tone so richly conspiratorial, that he suspected her of being a little tipsy: with the excitement of getting Lily off her hands, he thought; certainly not with this drop of claret cup. 'Why Mr Pandervil, we've bin and forgot the messages.'

Egg was at a loss. 'The messages, Mrs Colebrook. I don't quite . . .'

'Letters, telegrams, and I don't know what all!' cried Mrs Colebrook, her voice rising triumphantly, so that all might hear her. 'Yes indeed,' she said, nodding and smiling at the company, 'there's messages in galore!'

Egg began searching, guiltily, in his pockets.

'Bless my soul, I do believe I've left 'em all be'ind.'

'No,' said Mrs Colebrook, 'you never done that, Mr Pandervil.'

'No, 'ere they are!' Egg sighed with relief, and while with one hand he clutched a bundle of papers, with the other he mopped the perspiration from his brow. 'Well, I must put me specs on for this little job,' he said, hoping against hope that he might be able to work up a vein of jocularity. And to reach his spectacle-case, which was in the breast-pocket of his coat—a frock-coat of a somewhat ancient design, and green about the shoulders when seen in an unfriendly light—he must needs replace his handkerchief and allow, in his confusion, the precious messages to flutter out of his grasp. When they were restored to him, by the eager hands of Daise Hopper who cooed maternally in rendering this service, a belated sense of the occasion jerked him to his feet. They think I'm a poor old duffer, that's what they think. He resolved to put a good face on it. He cleared his throat. 'Well, ladies first, I suppose. That's what they taught me at school. What I mean is we'll first have the messages from the bride's relations. Now here they are: there's two of 'em—or is it three? No it's two. Mrs Crump sends heartiest congratula-

tions and fondest love to my darling niece Lily. That is, Mrs Crump's darling niece Lily. *And,*' said Egg, gaining time while he fumbled with the next of his documents, 'Lily's Uncle Boy—that's not the Uncle Boy that's here: seems she's got two, Lily has—wishes very much he could a bin here to tell the bridegroom what a lucky man he is. And so do we all I'm sure.' They all applauded this, but there was no pleasing Egg to-day: he liked them none the better for applauding. I'm sick of you and your faces, he said in the secrecy of his mind; but, quickly resuming his public character, he went on in his public voice: 'And now we come to Harold's folk. Harold's Aunty Sarah, eighty last week my boy, don't forget that! — Harold's Aunty Sarah Twigg sends a telegram. Loving wishes from Aunty Sarah and may Heavenly Father send rich blessings and long happiness to you and yours. And a tidy sum it must have cost her. Fancy paying a penny for Heavenly Father when she could have sent God for a ha'p'ny.' Egg noticed with infinite relish that he had made a sensation. 'That comes of marrying a parson,' he said, making bad worse. And a freakish turn of memory set him thinking of his late brother-in-law Ernest Twigg, as he had been when he, Egg, was a boy: a hearty fellow Ernest had been then,

a back-slapper, very different from the prim ecclesiastic he became in later years. It was little enough that Egg had seen, since their marriage, of this substantial and respectable pair; for he had made up his mind quite early, and for all we know quite mistakenly, that the Twiggs regarded him as a poor relation, and he had sometimes found satisfaction in knowing them to be childless: it would have been a humiliation to think of Sarah's children being in a higher social grade than his own. It sometimes, but not often, troubled his conscience that he knew so little of his sisters, three of whom, as he was vaguely aware, were still youngish people compared with himself—Felicia, Martha, and Jane were still in their sixties—but growing older I suppose, he said to himself, like the rest of us. There was a letter in his hand from Felicia, the widow of old Sam Reddick the dairyman at Keyborough, and the present temper of his audience, which had discovered in his remark an occasion for giggles frowns and deprecating smiles, according to their several ages and dispositions, made him think that he would do well to read it with no further delay. 'Now Harold my lad, listen to what y'r Aunty Flisher has to say: My dear brother it is a long time ago since I wrote you a letter always leaving such things to poor Sam and pleased indeed to hear

that your Harold has got a good girl and Aunty's very best love and wishes I'm sure tell him for future happiness. You'll be pleased to hear as this leaves me my rheumatism's a good deal better——' Egg folded the letter and turned to the next. 'That's all she says concerning you, Harold. Now what's this,' he said briskly, making a great show of interest in the last of his documents. But even while he was reading it the bitterness of not having Nicky there, and fearful conjectures about Nicky's fate, overwhelmed him. His voice, remaining steady, became toneless and tired. He felt like a cheated child the elaborate edifice of whose plans has at the last moment crashed to ruin before his expectant eyes. For what was the meaning of this wedding if Nicky was away? Why had he fussed and bothered at his time of life, pumping courage into Harold, cajoling Lily, hoodwinking Mabel, and removing Selina, the obstacle, from the path of true love? If Nicky, the reward, were to be withheld after all, he might have spared his pains and saved his labour. The letter in his hand was a garrulous affair, and hard to decipher moreover, so that it took him five minutes or more to communicate its contents; and towards the end, for which he thirsted, he became aware that the attention of his audience was faltering, being divided between him

and some reiterated street noise whose significance he did not appreciate. Whispering broke out in the room, and the stirring of restless feet: a disease that, despite the irritated glances he flashed from time to time over the rims of his spectacles, gradually infected everyone in the room but himself. And no sooner had his voice ceased speaking—drattit, he said, 'tisn't as if I *like* doing this sort a thing!—than several of his listeners ran to the window without apology and began a chorus of exclamation. Harold, himself conspicuous among these culprits, called out: 'I say, Dad! I say, Lily! I say, Mrs Colebrook—I mean Ma! Who do you think's arrived! In a blessed motor-car, Dad. Who do you think it is?'

Egg, stumbling towards the window and heedlessly knocking over one of Mrs Colebrook's best claret glasses in his course, found no words for reply. His mind held but one thought.

'Just you look here, Mr Pandervil,' cried Lily, seconding her husband's endeavours and seizing her father-in-law by the arm.

Harold took up the tale once more. 'Blest if it isn't Uncle Algy! Let's go and fetch him in,' cried Harold, plunging for the door. Perhaps he felt that he, with his Lily, had been in the centre of the picture long enough: it was good to escape. He was

followed by the younger members of the party, with Egg hot-foot at their heels.

They crowded round the car. And such a car! A large rich glittering snorting exuberant and self-satisfied air, with a fellow in livery at the wheel and Uncle Algy magnificent and venerable at his side, his eyes shining, his face rosy and wrinkled, his plump hands clasped round his noble belly as though he were congratulating himself on its possession.

Uncle Algy, genially ignoring the youngsters, addressed himself over their heads to his brother: 'Well, Egg old son, here I am as large as life, and it's good to see y'r dear old dial again, pon my word it is!'

Egg said, his voice quavering: 'Seen anything of Nicky?' He had been quick to notice, in one agonized glance, that the back of the car held nothing human.

'Thought I'd run down in the little bus,' said Uncle Algy. 'Capital little scooter, though we did have a bit of a mishap a hundred miles out of Mercester. But accidents *will* happen, old boy, even in the best regulated motor-cars. You know that.'

'Where's Nicky?' said Egg, unsmiling.

So sharp was the accent of appeal that it at last

reached the understanding even of Uncle Algy, who, with a grin that was half sheepish, half sympathetic, replied: 'I've got him safe and sound for you. Trust *me*, boy!' And a voice from heaven, as it seemed, called out eagerly: 'Here I am, Dad.'

Nicky, shooting up amid the baggage in the back of the car, leaped out, falling lightly on his two hands. He picked himself up with a nervous laugh and strode forward to greet his father. He saw the sunshine breaking, as after a night of storm, over his father's face. Bloody silly joke that, he thought; and I as good as told him so, he pleaded in self-justification. 'Hullo, Dad! Think I was never coming?'

'Yes,' said Egg, and for a moment could say no more; and a trembling came over Nicky as he met the glance, the half-incredulous glance, of those old, grave, glistening eyes. Dad's older than he was, there's no doubt of it.

4

'Not sleepy are you?' said Egg.

At last they were back at home sitting comfortably together round the kitchen grate, in which Egg, deceitfully pretending to have noticed a nip

in the air, had with his own hands laid and lit a small fire.

Nicky smothered a yawn. 'Sleepy? Not a bit!'

'Well you haven't got to get up early to-morrow, that's one good thing.'

'No fear,' said Nicky.

'No five o'clock for you to-morrow, my boy.'

'I should jolly well think not,' said Nicky.

His father observed him shrewdly. 'I believe you *are* sleepy, whatever you may say. Want to go to bed?'

Nicky, lacking heart to answer with an unqualified yes, glanced at the clock defensively. 'Let's go at half past one,' he said. 'That gives us another twenty-five minutes.'

'There'll be time for a cup of tea,' said Egg, and leaning forward in his chair he lifted the kettle on to the red coals. 'Soon be boiling.'

Nicky jumped up. 'I'll go and get the crocks.'

'That's the style,' said Egg. He was excited. 'I expect you know where to find 'em, eh Nicky?'

'I expect,' said Nicky.

Father and son exchanged a grin of satisfaction. Having tea at one o'clock in the morning struck them both as being a good joke.

'So Mr Crabbe thinks you'll make a farmer, does he?' remarked Egg for the twentieth time. Unable

to wait for Nicky's return he had followed him as far as the scullery door.

'That's what he said,' admitted Nicky, picking saucers out of the rack.

'I thought he would,' said Egg. 'I rather thought he would. That's good news that is.'

But the commendation in his voice was rather perhaps for Mr Crabbe than for Nicky: it was pleasant to know that they had not been deceived in the man.

A cup of strong tea woke Nicky up, and the intimacy of the hour encouraged unprecedented confidences. Nevertheless he cleared his throat several times, and several times, when the words were almost out of his mouth, substituted others at the last moment. 'Got something to shew you, Dad.'

Noting his shyness, Egg pricked up his ears. Some girl, I suppose, he thought: you're starting early, young man. 'Something to shew, have you?'

'Oh nothing so much,' said Nicky, striving (too late) to be casual. 'It's in my bag. Shall I get it?' He was already out of his chair again, his fingers on the catch of the bag. 'It's only a sort of poem. Oh, and I brought a pipe along.' In a shamefaced fashion he pushed a new briar pipe across the deal table towards his father, and then, trying to

look as though the gift were not there, unfolded a weekly journal, found a particular page and a particular column, and thrust it under Egg's nose.

Egg was fondling the new pipe and staring brightly at distance and stammering, precisely as Nicky himself would have done in his place. The interruption came as a relief to him.

'A poem, d'ye say? Ah, my boy, I never did have much of a head for poetry.' But as he took the paper from his son's hand, and followed a pointing finger, some moment of unremembered yet unforgotten past made brief and poignant music in him. 'Lemme get my other specs.' For his eyes were suddenly dimmed, he didn't know why.

The poem was not a long one, but it took Egg some little while to get the hang of it. After the second reading, however, he gave up worrying about the difficulties, being content to enjoy the sensation of warm sunlit woods, and birds singing, and the sound of running water not far away. Yes, he liked the poem. Some parts of it he liked so much that he repeated them over and over again in his mind before venturing a word of comment. But nothing pleased him so much, nor if the poem had been a hundred times better could it have pleased him so much, as the sight of the author's

name clearly printed underneath, printed in a real paper that was bought and sold and read by the great and clever people who understood such things, men among whose names must some day, he could not doubt, be numbered this new name: Nicholas Pandervil.

CHAPTER THE THIRD

THE LOVERS

I

Mr Crabbe had been not easily won to the belief that Nicky would make a good farmer. He had seemed, at first, suspicious of the boy. 'Well, young man, I hope you mean to work. Whatsoever thy 'and findeth to do, eh? You know your Bible, I 'ope?'

'I shall certainly do my best,' said Nicky in confusion. He was eighteen and profoundly sceptical of all the religion that had been offered him.

'Do it with all thy might,' said Mr Crabbe, finishing his quotation with a smack of the lips. 'You come from a godly 'ome, I believe, young Pandervil?' Nicky's reply, though unintelligible, was taken to be affirmative. 'Fambly prayers and all, eh?' said Mr Crabbe. He was a short, thickset man between forty and fifty, with reddish eyes, a clipped red moustache, prominent fox-red nostrils, and bushing red eyebrows; no Mershireman he, as his speech made evident, but a foreigner, as the natives say, from one of the more northern

counties. Brisk, and brimming with self-complacency, yet not unwilling to be friendly, he stood with arms akimbo and head cocked appraisingly, awaiting Nicky's answer.

Nicky all but hung his head. 'Now and again,' he said indistinctly. He was as shy and ashamed as Egg would have been in like circumstances. And he was compelled by his truthful habit to add: 'Not so often. In fact, hardly ever. But we *have* had them.'

'Ah!' Mr Crabbe emitted a brief bark of satisfaction. 'We'll mebbe teach you a thing or two more than farming here, eh Mother!' He rubbed his hands together in unctuous glee, and the next morning made haste to begin his good work. For Family Prayers he assumed an accent of quite astonishing refinement, which did not, however, obliterate the impression that even from God himself he would stand no nonsense. The effort to sound humble hurt Mr Crabbe; and he was further hampered in these public devotions by the erratic behaviour of his two young daughters, Gladys and Lottie, and the failure of their haggard, thin-lipped mother to control them. 'O greecious Gard and Heavenly Fawther,' cried Mr Crabbe, with the air of a man in a hurry giving instructions to a lift-boy, 'we would 'umbly ask and crave thy greecious

blessing, O Lard, upon this 'ousehold one and all gathered 'ere together at thy footstool. And especially would we ask thee—stop scraping them feet, Lottie!—would we ask thee, at this junction and at this season and at this time, to drop a blessing or two on young Pandervil, the stranger within our gates. There's no call for you to giggle, Gladys: I'll teach you giggle—with a slipper, girl! That he may be led to do his duty like a man, and work hard, and keep straight, and be a credit. Give 'im strength, Gard. Give 'im persevverance. Give 'im religion. Give 'im a sense of duty. And give 'im,' said Mr Crabbe, briskly completing his order, 'thy 'oly spirit.' And when he had finished the prayer, in order to mark the occasion he read with flashing eyes a passage from the Old Testament, spat vigorously into the fireplace, and filled his mouth with a rasher of bacon wound round and round his fork. So, Father having begun his breakfast, Mother and family and Nicky himself timidly followed his example. This was Nicky's first experience of the Crabbes' bacon and the Crabbes' Family Prayers. He had no second taste of either until six days were past and another Sunday was come.

The household included John James, a young man—five years older than Nicky—who was work-

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ing for his keep and gathering experience against the day when his father would 'set him up'. James was remarkable chiefly for his taciturnity. Such remarks as he made were all most dismally to the point, the point being farming and stock-breeding. At night, when Nicky entered the shared bedroom, he would wake to say 'You're back then,' and instantly fall asleep again. By day, on social occasions such as a bread-and-cheese lunch shared in the fields, he would utter a few pithy sentences, as though trying over his knowledge like a schoolboy preparing for examination. 'Hurdle tegs on turnips—best way,' he would say, staring mournfully at the crust in his hand. And, half an hour later: 'Clover first like, then wheat—gets ground ready for wheat, clover does.' This was perhaps James's idea of keeping the conversation lively. The rest was silence. Nicky sometimes made mild fun of him, but the industrious fellow was proof against that. Nothing moved him; much never reached him. When Charlie Bly, the cowman, made obscene jokes about Flo Petula, a blameless and attractive young kitchen-maid at a neighbouring farmstead, James grinned and grunted and uttered an aphorism or two about crops and the weather and the price of pigs. Nor did the changing seasons change his demeanour. In summer he

sweated, sowing turnips, loading hay-wains, cleaning hedges, swilling out stables and cowsheds, and knocking the small blind heads of unwanted puppies against the stable wall; and in winter, rising in pitch-dark mornings and lighting a candle and shaking Nicky from sleep, he would growl in a sibilant undertone as he wiped his face with a damp flannel, that growl, suggestive of a man trying to smother himself, being his tribute to the winter coldness. But otherwise it made—so far as Nicky could observe—no difference to him whether the sky was blue or grey, the birds singing or silent. By day or by night, in summer or winter, whether drunk or sober, James remained the same neutral-coloured creature, a born drudge, a mechanical farmer, a clockwork man. One day, in the harvest field, he was persuaded to take too much cider, which indulgence, though it made him more talkative, did not in the least affect the quality of his talk: his maxims that morning covered the whole farming year from seed-time to harvest.

With no one but James within reach, Nicky was starved of companionship. It puzzled him to observe that Gladys and Lottie were rather fond of that silent man, and that he himself, so much nearer them in age, somehow intimidated them. Gladys was sixteen, her sister a year younger; and,

though they were not specially attractive or amiable girls, Nicky in his loneliness would have been glad enough of their friendship. He had no one at all to talk to, or even to sit with in the pleasant silence that familiar friendship breeds. Mr Crabbe, uneasily arrogant in his self-importance, was always concerned to prove that he, educated or not educated, was more than a match for any young man who came to him, fresh from school, talking genteel, and with money in his hand, to be taught farming. 'Needn't be afraid of dirtying y'r fingers, Pandervil. Nor y'r boots neither.' This was a favourite saying. And once, when for the first time in history the word 'Woolsack' appeared in the *Mercester Chronicle*, and provoked artless questions from Lottie, Mr Crabbe, having sneeringly extorted an answer from Nicky, burst into angry sarcasm. 'Ah, my love, Mr Pandervil knows, you see. It's what the Lord Chancellor sits on. A kind of cushion. Correct me if I'm wrong, Mr Pandervil. In Germany it's the Rucksack. Ain't that so, Mr Pandervil?' He gave a short laugh. 'I may not 'ave bin to the Oxford and Cambridge College, but I know what's what. . . . Well Mother, and what are *you* scowling at, eh? You mind y'r own business and look a bit pleasant about it.' Clearly Mr Crabbe was not a man from

whom Nicky could hope for friendship. As for Mrs Crabbe, she was too profoundly worried and dispirited to be able to take more than a merely civil perfunctory interest in a young man whom her husband had made up his mind to dislike. Nicky was driven into himself, a dark tumultuous wonderful world.

That world, upon its surface, seemed placid enough, even dull. But below there was a quickening and a restless desire. Earth's loveliness—and Mershire was lovely in Nicky's eyes, though he didn't see it quite as Egg saw it—could not be all. What one saw could never be all. These fields, these birds and beasts, these patient dreaming cows, these young sheep calling to each other like babies, this astonishing sky and those nude maternal hills of the horizon—lovely, he thought, lovely and wonderful, but there's something behind it all, some meaning, isn't there?—something that's like Edna Howard (that boyish fancy), warm and intimate and all-sufficing. In search of this mystery he cycled on Sunday evenings to Mercester, under cover of going to church; and sometimes, indeed, he did go to church, not in order to worship Mr Crabbe's God—an irascible potentate, peevish with age, but still doing a brisk trade in repentance and forgiveness—but in the hope of finding there

what he had never found in the Ebenezer Chapel at home, a presence (for he had read a little Wordsworth) that disturbs us . . . yes, disturbed him, and quickened him, and spilled silence like a benediction into his heart, a presence that he felt in the first soft breath of a summer evening and heard in the soaring skylark. The reaction from Ebenezerism drove him, inevitably, towards the Church of England; but God, if he attended that place of worship, always slipped quietly out, it seemed, just before the sermon. Nicky took some pleasure in the sonorous prayers, though they did not, to his mind, make good sense. And why is religion so *holy,* he thought; and he hardly knew at first what he meant by the question, for he had found no words for his obscure feeling that somehow this holiness, this solemnity and hush, was a kind of timidity in disguise. It could not burst into song, as the lark did; it did not make the heart leap as did the sight of the first green of the year budding in the hedges. It was—and this he did say—sober and respectful and middle-aged, this holiness. And, quite definitely, it wasn't what he wanted. What, then, did he want?

Well at least he didn't want Gladys Crabbe, though perhaps . . . no, he didn't want Gladys Crabbe, who came seeking him one evening, one

warm dusky summer evening, in the granary. 'There's a bit of supper ready. Dad and Mum's abed.'

'All right,' said Nicky. He concealed his surprise. 'Thanks. I've about finished here anyhow.' After a pause he added, making conversation: 'Where's Lottie?'

'She's abed too. She's not feeling herself.'

Gladys made no movement to go. She stood near him, tall and slim and rather disturbing in this new mood of friendliness, her face and flowing hair a vague blur in the dim half-light. 'I say, I'm sorry I was rude to you at tea.'

'What's that?' said Nicky rather sharply. He was surprised to the point of alarm. Gladys was eighteen now, and he twenty-one; and after all, if rudeness was in question, she had been more or less rude to him for two years. But his feeble pretence of not having heard could not be sustained. 'Oh, that doesn't matter,' he said. 'Not a bit.'

The straw rustled. She came nearer. 'Will you forgive me? I've always been catty, haven't I? I dunno why. It's something comes over me, so's I want to bite. It isn't as if . . .' She stretched out an eager wavering hand to him. 'Will you . . .'

'Why, what's come over you, Gladys!' He

forced a laugh, which even to himself didn't sound very real. 'You mustn't take things so seriously.'

They confronted each other in the darkness, shadow to shadow. He found it queer and frightening that he could not see her face. And presently the silence was broken by a quick gasping sob. 'Oh I hate you, I hate you!' Her voice broke, changing to a childish squeak. She clutched at his hand and pressed her mouth against it, and sank to the ground at his feet.

'What on earth . . . ? I say, are you ill? Let me help you into the house.'

He felt helpless and foolish, and angry for being made to feel so. Bending over the sobbing girl, he tentatively touched her shoulder, and then, becoming bolder, began lifting her. At last she uncovered her face and thrust him fiercely away. 'I hate you!' she repeated brokenly.

It was very odd; there was something here that greatly puzzled and excited him; he could find no clear reason for not believing what she said, though in his heart he doubted it. He stood waiting until her agitation had subsided. 'Let's go and have that supper, Gladys, for heaven's sake.' At last she consented, and they went back to the house, she walking quickly, with downcast head, a yard or two in front of him. James, as they entered the

kitchen, was wiping drops of milk from his ragged moustache. 'Good night,' said James, rising and going to the door, and the two others sat uneasily facing each other, almost as if they were waiting for his heavy footsteps on the stairs to cease and leave them undisturbed. The girl's hair, in colour a lustreless gold with rich hints of copper here and there, was in disorder: a warm handful of it, unfastened, hung over her left shoulder and provided a new setting for her profile. She sat moodily silent, not touching her food; and Nicky, stealing an occasional secret glance at her, saw for the first time that she was a woman. His heart began beating loudly, and he found he could no longer swallow without difficulty. She would have let me kiss her up there! Why didn't I? Why didn't I want to? For he had never—and he burned when he thought of it—he had never kissed anyone as he now wished to kiss Gladys. But it wasn't Gladys he wanted, as he knew. And he knew, or fancied, that if he let go of himself now he would be committed to something far beyond his calculation, something which, while making him profoundly different (oh profoundly! he thought in his innocence), would leave him in one thing unchanged, for it would not and could not, Gladys could not, appease the ultimate desire of his

heart, which was set upon a vision of beauty so marvellous, so remote, so far beyond the range of waking sight, that his imagination was all but exhausted with the labour of conceiving it. I wish she would be quiet, he thought in a panic; for, though she had said not a word since entering the house, and though she kept her eyes averted and her mouth angrily pouting, she was still in a state of tumult.

'Well, bed for me!' said Nicky. His chair scraped on the brick floor.

He walked round the table and past her. Unwillingly, his feet faltered. Gladys did not raise her drooping head, but he saw a shiver pass through her and he hated himself. In imagination he cupped her face in his hands and kissed it hungrily. She would lean back in his arms and abandon herself to him. But it wasn't Gladys he wanted, and he dragged himself away from her allurement. Not Gladys, and yet, as he entered the bedroom— 'You're back then!' grunted James, in his sleep— why the devil didn't I do it up in the granary! It's too late now. I wish . . . if only . . . I wish. Wishing vaguely that everything, especially himself, were different, he at last drifted into sleep, to be wakened, almost immediately as it seemed, by James shaking him.

'Time gup!' James said. Receiving no answer, he repeated the injunction. 'Time gup!'

'What!' Nicky was incredulous. 'Oh *damn!*' James, in his methodical unenthusiastic fashion, was already smearing himself with water. The sight of that unresponsiveness roused a little demon in Nicky. 'James, I made a remark.'

'Eh?' said James.

'I said: Oh damn! Do you agree with me, dear James? Oh damn! Oh blast! It's rotten getting up in the dark. Don't you think so, brother slave?'

'Um,' said James, splashing and hissing in his basin.

Nicky sat up, slid his legs out of bed, and paused for a moment dangling them.

'James, you're a bloody man, aren't you!' He affected a ghastly jocularity for the concealment of his bitterness. 'You're like a suet pudding, James, and when I think on thee, dear friend . . . I say, could you bear to show a bit of feeling from time to time, just to oblige me? I don't ask much. But if you could swear sometimes, or oversleep, or smoke a cigarette in bed, or from your daily duty stray and get a wench with child . . . Could you? Will you?'

'Eh?' said James. His face emerged from behind a towel. He had not been listening. 'We'll

maybe get a bit of that vetch cleared away 'smorning. No use to anyone, isn't vetch.'

2

Crabbe's Farm, on account of its proximity to the little shop in which Miss Lady Dark sold boiled sweets out of one bottle and picture-postcards out of another, was held to be in the district of Brinkley. Miss Lady Dark (why she had been christened Lady I don't know) was situated almost precisely nine and a half miles east of Mercester, the hub of the civilized world. She sat behind her counter, a large ageing woman with the beginnings of a beard that the young men of an earlier generation would have envied her, and supplied the world with postage stamps, gum, cigarettes, chocolate, stationery, and acid drops in various colours. She did not speak often; she seldom moved; she merely sat still and grew larger and older, and, with the help of her brother the postman, dealt with the letters despatched and received by the five and thirty inhabitants of Brinkley. From Lady's plump fingers Nicky received most of his letters, for they reached Brinkley after the first delivery, and there was no second delivery in the district unless the postman happened to be passing that way. It became therefore necessary, for im-

patient people like Nicky, to call at the office and confront the postmistress in person. Nicky, in his solitude, became more and more dependent on his letters. Most of them were from his father, who wrote with unfailing regularity once a week. Others were from Tooley: queer things these, curiously middle-aged and, in spite of their friendliness, somehow formal in tone. Tooley bought and sold in the city; he did not see what he bought; nor, till he had sold it again, did he pay for it; in fact, what he did, so far as Nicky could see, was to sit in his office and do neat little sums the answers to which represented his profit. In this simple fashion Tooley, still in his early twenties, was growing rich; he was thinking, he said, of settling down, and had found (but here I do not believe him) a nice place at Crouch End. No doubt there was a girl somewhere in his mind's eye, but of her he said nothing, so that Nicky was not obliged as yet to burden his imagination with the singular idea of Tooley as a married man, being called 'my dear', and sleeping in a double bed, and mowing a small suburban lawn every fine Saturday afternoon in the summer. But he was a little chilled by the change that had overtaken Tooley. 'Well, my dear Pandy, I must close now, With kind regards and wishing you "all the best", Yours

sincerely . . .' In such sentences Nicky could not recognize the voice of his friend. Those quotation marks daunted him.

Not least among the more infrequent of his correspondents was Uncle Algy, who wrote from time to time insisting that Nicky should visit him again. From Uncle Algy he had indeed a standing invitation; such phrases as 'open house' and 'Liberty Hall' were for ever on the old man's lips and in his letters, and Nicky could not go often enough to please him. Uncle Algy lived at Woodithorpe, a couple of miles north of Mercester where, first as a clerk and afterwards as a partner in the firm of Fox Fox Fox Deever and Pandervil, he had had such a prosperous career. Retiring from business thirteen years before, at the age of sixty-five, he had bought a miraculous 'little place' at Woodithorpe known as the Old Vicarage, where 'me and little Min, Eggie boy, can get a bit of quiet at last'. Quiet was the last thing you would have supposed Uncle Algy wanted, for he was not himself a quiet man, and when presently he got it in a form he had never bargained for—the devastating silence of bereavement—he was changed from that hour, for though he recovered, in time, his jauntiness of manner, there was now something in his life he couldn't talk about. Of Aunty

Min he spoke more than enough: of her goodness, her patience, her devotion, and how she was carried off, as you might say, by an east wind on top of a bit of a sniffing cold. But of his grief, and what the loss of her meant to him, he said nothing; the most profound experience of his life, it was the only one he made no conversational use of. Since then he had had Mrs Meadows, a middle-aged widow, to look after him, her father the septuagenarian George Hake to control the garden, and her son Tom to assist both. There were still cronies who came from Mercester and tempted him to eat and drink more than was good for him, for feasting his friends was become perhaps the greatest of accessible gratifications; and there were one or two young fellows, too, who came to admire and to laugh and to exchange winks with each other behind his back. But for the most part he had no audience but Mrs Meadows, an unresponsive woman, and old George Hake, whom, although he was seven years George's senior and George a man who might have passed for fifty, he insisted on regarding as a venerable museum piece. Nevertheless he was proud of his own age and would have quickly corrected anyone who understated it. He spent most of his time, in fine weather, being pushed about the grounds in a bath-chair by Tom

Meadows or driven in his car by the same Tom Meadows (but how different in shining livery!); and he was as full of pawky jokes about his rheumatism as he had once been of boasts about his health. Now, as then, he used hackneyed sayings with the air of having invented them. 'Fit as a fiddle, boy. Fit as a brace of fiddles. But touch wood, of course!' That had been a favourite remark in early manhood. And now, despite his having touched wood regularly for fifty years, he was in the grip of an enemy that he knew would never let him go. 'A bag of old bones, that's me,' he would say, with a pleased air, as though it had been the best joke in the world. 'And a bag of old *aching* bones, what's more. But bless my soul, young Nick, I wish every man o' my age was the match for *me* in health and strength. In a general way y'know. In a general way.' Sometimes, when the sun shone, he would call his nephew 'Old Nick', and laugh homerically at the joke, recalling what Nicky's Granny Noom had said when Egg, who never wearied of telling the story, had brought to her the news of Nicky's birth and name. It was one of the most enduring and popular of the family jokes; even 'poor Carrie' had been known to enjoy it, and Egg, when he remembered that, for a moment wished her

alive again. To Egg, nowadays, she was always, when he spoke of her, 'poor Carrie' or 'your poor mother', that 'poor' representing a forlorn attempt to compensate her, in retrospect, for the fact that even though in a fashion one loved or had loved her, she was for the greater part of her life an essentially unlikeable woman. No one spoke of Algy's late wife as 'poor Min'; one could not pity so blithe a spirit, one could only pity the world that had lost her.

Uncle Algy's house was a solid, dignified, early Georgian building in white stone. Screened, but not wholly hidden, by a group of tall pines, it stood a hundred yards back from a quiet hedge-bordered road. At the back lay three acres or so of garden and a small paddock where the ancient donkey—friend of Nicky's childhood—still grazed. The garden ascended in a series of three terraced lawns to a tiny forest of silver birches. These trees, slender and maidenly, stood, it seemed, on the very edge of the world, with nothing but sky—or was it sea? the imagination asked—shewing between them; for they grew upon a narrow ridge, beyond which the ground sloped sharply away to the wall that surrounded the estate. Uncle Algy would never allow himself to be wheeled to a point from which that wall was visible; for some reason never

stated even in his thoughts, he preferred to stare at the picture of sky that the trees framed for him.

For Nicky the place was at once familiar and new. The reality confronting him strangely confirmed and corrected his childhood memories of it. The garden was so much smaller than he had thought it; and the paddock, once a vast green kingdom of happiness, was now just a paddock, a half-acre paddock. There was a magic gone, and Aunty Min for ever absent; but there was another magic come, for beauty now had for Nicky the air of a promise. The dew that sparkled on that smooth grass, the satin touch of green buds and green leaves, the thrust of flowers towards the light and the young trees yielding to the wind—these and a thousand other incidents in the lovely natural drama were somehow, he dimly felt (not thought), prophetic of a desire fulfilled. And, though he recognized a pathos in Uncle Algy's predicament, he was too youthfully and egoistically alive to be much saddened by it. The old man had had a long life, and couldn't, in the nature of things, last much longer, reflected Nicky; but whenever the spectre started up in his thoughts he was quick to remind himself that death was the common lot and that he, anyhow, needn't begin thinking about it

for another fifty years or so. Meanwhile there was life; the board was spread for him, the feasting hardly begun; and he did not lack appetite. These visits to the Old Vicarage, this contact with an aged man, whetted his appetite, while renewing for him that sense he had had in boyhood of worlds, many in one, of which he alone had the entry. It was Nicky who called this place miraculous, by which he meant only that its conjunction with Uncle Algy was the most improbable thing—now that one came to think of it—that could have happened. Didn't know the old boy had such good taste. But p'raps it was Aunty Min's doing. There was reason for this latter supposition, for it was admittedly due to Aunty Min that the Old Vicarage did not suffer a drastic change of name. 'Algermin House' had been her husband's first fancy, and 'Pandervil Court' the likeliest alternative. 'But y'r aunt didn't see eye to eye about that, Nicky. So I let her have her way. The best woman in the world. The very best, there's not a doubt. But just a lil bit conservative, my boy, as women *will* be. You'll find that out for yourself, young man. Believe *me!* But don't,' added Uncle Algy, 'don't be in too much of a hurry about that kind of thing. Ten years time'll be soon enough, eh?'

'In ten years time I shall be thirty-two, uncle.'

'Dessay you will, boy. Quite an old man.' This was said almost in Egg's manner. 'Don't you be in a hurry.'

'No hurry,' said Nicky, insincerely. 'Still, if I ever do get farming on my own I'll have to instal a butter-maker on the premises, I s'pose. Farmers have to have wives, don't they?'

Nicky took refuge in jocularity, being shy of the subject of marriage because of his consuming interest in it, and shy of discussing his own future because he could not help knowing that Uncle Algy was planning benefactions for him on a large scale. He wished Uncle Algy had been the kind of man one could consult about intimate affairs; he wished, indeed, that such a kind of man existed. But probably Algy, like Egg, would only look solemn and uncomfortable and change the subject, and so make him feel ashamed of having mentioned it. For nowadays Nicky was uneasy; troubled by amorous fantasy, angry with himself, and more than a little frightened, seeing no way of escape but to propose marriage to Gladys Crabbe, whose presence in the house disturbed him more and more as the weeks went by. He confessed to himself that he wanted Gladys, but he knew that it was not Gladys he wanted. The thought of marriage with her made his pulse hurry, and he could hardly stop to re-

member that there was more in marriage than going to bed with a woman. Sometimes, nevertheless, he did remember this, and found it so little to his liking that he contrived to forget it again. He was divided against himself, the one half of him, nature's dupe, plotting the overthrow of the other, which saw that he was in danger of bartering his life's freedom for a brief fiery pleasure. Dash it, he thought, there's no harm in kissing the girl; and his fancy began inventing a friendship between himself and Gladys—just a warm friendship, nothing more, of which kissing and mutual fondling should be the innocent expression. It should all be secret and beautiful and chaste. But even while indulging it he didn't much believe in his dream; and under the scrutiny of commonsense it became manifestly absurd and impracticable, for the sufficient reason that in Nicky's world a kiss was in effect a betrothal. In face of that convention how could he explain to Gladys that he had no 'intentions'? The difficulty was insuperable. Meanwhile he found himself on more than one of his Sunday evenings in Mercester, prowling the streets in quest of a temptation strong enough to resolve, however crudely, his torturing doubts. He received and returned glances; he looked back, he wavered in his walk, he turned to follow, and then, defeated by

prudence, turned again and resumed his original course. There was one woman in particular whom he often caught sight of; he was attracted by her accessibility, by something in her bearing that he interpreted as comradeliness, and by the feeling that here was a woman without shame, and one, therefore, with whom he himself need have no shame. Sin was not sin to her—a strange and liberating thought! He was attracted, and he wilfully exaggerated the attraction, dressing it up in all the colours of romance. Half-knowing himself to be playing a game of self-deception, he in his thoughts vowed her pretty and plucky and charming; waxed indignant with the world that had degraded her; and longed to rescue her, longed to play knight-errant to her forlornness, a part that would naturally involve an exchange of tenderness. Disgusting muck, he said to himself; she's got something to sell and I want to buy it, that's all. And that wasn't the whole truth either, but it served its purpose, which was to rouse him from a fevered dream and send him hurrying off to the inn-stables where his bicycle was lodged. Cycling back in the moonlight to Mr Crabbe's, he congratulated himself upon having escaped something that he knew would have been ugly in retrospect, a perpetual scourging of his self-esteem; but the thought could not

be dismissed that life was after all none the easier for this escape, the danger being avoided but not removed. And this thought was confirmed the very next Sunday evening he had free, for this time he followed her with more persistence: still undecided, it is true, but giving freer rein to his idealizing fancy. In a side street she dawdled and from time to time cast a quick questioning glance at him over her shoulder. Wonderfully alluring she was; his heart throbbed noisily, he could scarcely breathe in his excitement as he sauntered after her, still trying to conceal his interest in her and still uncertain of what he intended. Should he speak? Yes. And what then? Nothing. He intended nothing, after all: with a pang of disappointment he realized that he intended nothing, whatever he desired. This is ugly, stupid; I'll clear out of here, he thought; but his feet still followed—and more quickly now—in the wake of adventure, until the woman suddenly turned round and came towards him. Now at last he'd got to do something, one way or the other. She stared at him. He met her stare.

'Hullo, dear!' A thin hard voice. 'Where are you off to?'

'Me? Oh, I'm going home,' said Nicky.

'Aren't you coming with me?' She gave him a

penny-in-the-slot smile. 'I know a place quite near.'

'Sorry,' he said, 'I've no time.' O Lord what a fool I am! What a mess! He was red with humiliation, thinking how he had wasted this poor drab's time and that she hated him for it. He pulled out some loose silver. 'Would you . . . will you . . .?'

She made no difficulty about that. 'I don't mind if I do, Clarence. Some other time, eh?'

'Yes, another time.' He was so grateful to her for accepting his money that he feigned a more than polite enthusiasm. 'Whereabouts do you . . . live? I mean, where are you likely to be?' Almost before she had finished her answer, to which he didn't at all listen, he was moving away, eager to put time and space between himself and this encounter, that he might forget it, or explain it away, and so stop disliking and despising himself: in which endeavour he very soon succeeded, knowing once and for all not what he wanted but at least what he didn't want.

On his Sunday evenings he went no more to Mercester but to Upridge, whose little parish church provided a convenient pretext for a two-mile walk across fields. Here, in the following spring, he met Jane. His first sight of her was in the church itself, she sitting but a few yards away,

her profile clearly defined against a pillar; and in that moment it was as if the church, and the world containing it, became empty of all but this girl. Silence came upon him, shutting out alien sounds, so that in time, with much listening, he could hear his heart cry out She is mine, mine—his, not to have, for he was uplifted beyond greed of possession, but to worship and to remember. Until it was time to go he remained in an ecstasy, renewing his wonder in frequent glances, slowly gathering with his mind a knowledge of what had happened in him. In the porch, on his way out, he overtook this girl and heard her companion call her by name. She was tall and very dark; young too, perhaps nineteen, perhaps twenty; her eyes were grave and candid; the curve of her cheek was music to him. She and the woman (her mother?) turned off towards Upridge village, and Nicky went on his way possessed by her. The fields he crossed to reach Crabbe's Farm were warmly tinged with sunset; the blackthorn was in bud, and primroses sprinkled their light along the hedges. After walking a mile or so in a heaven-filled silence, Nicky suddenly began singing hymns at the top of his voice, and didn't stop singing, except to take breath, until he came within earshot of the farm. He wondered how he would keep from grinning at folks when he

met them; but he managed to avoid the Crabbes; and James, as usual, was in bed before him.

'So you're back then?' said James.

'Not me,' said Nicky. 'I'm a blessed ghost.' The remark passed for facetious, as he had intended it should, but bits of remembered verse, with other lovely things, had been running in his intoxicated head, and this phrase of all, at the moment, seemed to describe his condition best. He felt free of the body, radiant and free. Darkness had been cast out of him. 'In bed early to-night, aren't you?'

James grunted, deprecating such elaborate conversation. 'Gennelman left a letter for you.'

'Letter? What sort of a chap was he? Where's the letter?'

'Come from y'r uncle at Woodithorpe. And the motor car's fetching you in the morning.'

'The what!' said Nicky. A purely rhetorical question. He was astonished.

'Motor-car. Not deaf, are you! Y'r uncle's sending his motor-car to fetch you.'

'Golly! What's Brother Crabbe got to say about it?'

'He don't mind. It's me does the work, not him. The gennelman soon talked him round.'

'Talking of that gentleman,' said Nicky, 'who is he? How did he get here?'

'In a motor-car. I told you.'

'In a car? It must have been Tom Meadows.'

'As big as a greenus,' grumbled James, 'that motor-car was.' He shut his eyes and gave an aggressive imitation of a man asleep.

Nicky, disregarding this hint, began dancing round the room singing his father's favourite anthem: 'How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of them that bring good tidings.' Breaking off suddenly he tiptoed to James's bedside and asked, looking down on the sleeper. '*Are* your feet beautiful, James? I doubt it.'

Grunt, grunt. 'What's that?'

'I was asking about that letter, James. Have you got it?'

' 'Sin one of my pockets.' He pointed with his nose towards the bedrail. 'You can go through 'em all till you come to it.'

'May I really! Consider, James! Don't be rash!' He was already at work on the first pocket. 'Who am I to come prying into your secret life of vice and crime? That's a rotten vowel-sequence, isn't it: life of vice and crime. What if I find a row of little Jameses leaning against a photographer's stile! And their mothers, your lusty paramours! . . . Good, I've got it.'

'Got what?' asked James, staring owlishly.

'You're soaked, fair soaked. That's what you are, Pandervil. They sell beer at your church, by the look of things.'

Nicky was reading his letter:

My dear young Nephew: I have had a bit of a bad turn, but musent grumble time of the year and none the worse for it. I am sending the Car over in the morning to have a bit of an Outing, it will do you good and I have got a bit of news which will meet with your Aprooval, unless I'm a blessed Dutchman which I have never heard of in our family. But joking apart do not fail me, from

Yr. Affec. Uncle,

ALGERNON PANDERVIL.

P.S. Away all day tell Mr. Crab.

The prospect of a day's holiday surprised and delighted him, but it surprised him less now than it would have done a little earlier; for in this new life, in which he had been born not quite two hours ago, happy surprises of this kind and of all kinds were only to be expected. He fell asleep thinking not of his outing with Uncle Algy but of Jane's profile. And chancing to wake in the night he was visited by the idea, which seemed to him quite

novel, that he and she must have been always in some mysterious fashion bound to each other, or at the least that he had had prevision of her in dreams: only so could he explain to himself his instant recognition of her.

3

Very warmly wrapped up, for there was a nip in the air this morning, Uncle Algy slowly and painfully walked the few yards from his breakfast-room to his car, being supported on one side by Nicky and on the other by Tom Meadows splendid in green livery. He had just provided his nephew with a second breakfast, for he still retained a hazy memory of his own farming days: 'Early birds you farming fellows, eh boy! And the early worm ain't very filling.' Bubbling with excitement, he had talked incessantly throughout the meal, himself eating very little. 'A little surprise for you, young Nick. Just a bit of a joke up me sleeve. Wasn't going to tell you a thing about it till arterwards. Going to make it a case of the fay accomply, I was. That's right: eat a good meal boy: you'll need it. There's to be fun to-day, or my name's not Jack Robinson. Altered me mind only yesterday. Dashed if I don't take the boy

with me, I thought to myself. Hi Tom, I said, run over to Mr Crabbe's place with this bit of a letter, there's a good chap. And by the way, Nicky' —his voice became wheezily confidential—'don't bother y'r head about anything Tom Meadows may tell you. Full of doctor he is; doctor this and doctor the other. If you're a good boy I'll let you into a secret. My medical man Brother Physic—that's what I call 'im, takes it all in good part, pleasant young chap he is—well, he don't much want me to go out to-day, doesn't Brother Physic. Take things easy, don't tire yourself, not as young as you were, won't be answerable for the consequences—that kind of talk. And me been looking forward to this bit of a how-d'ye-do for weeks past. Not go out!—that's a fine story. Ah, here comes friend Tom. Car ready, Thomas?'

Seated in the car, after the agony—which he angrily tried to conceal—of the struggle to reach it, Uncle Algy consented to be silent for a while; but before long he was at it again. He drew from his pocket a bundle of papers.

'Now where d'ye think we're going first, boy?'

Nicky, smiling, said he had no idea.

'Ever heard of Keyborough?' cried Uncle Algy, infinitely pleased with his strategy.

'Keyborough.' Nicky acted surprise. 'You mean

Dad's old place. I remember you pointing it out to me last summer.'

'I did,' said Uncle Algy. 'You're quite right, my boy. We were in this very car, and here we are again, going to that very farm.'

'To have another look at it?'

Uncle Algy shook with delighted laughter. 'That's good that is. You don't know how good that is, Nicky, not hardly. Yes, we're going to have another look at it. That's just what we're going to do.' He was rosy with joy.

'What's the game, uncle? You've got one of your schemes on, I can see that.'

'Schemes?' Uncle Algy contrived a grimace that was all innocence. 'Me got schemes! Never. Nothing schemy about me, nephew. Everything above board, that's my motto. We're just going to have another look at the old farm that me and y'r dad was boys together on. That's all. And we've got a nice day for it, eh?' He winked with a great show of cunning, and abandoned himself to another fit of laughing, which, however, came to an end with significant abruptness. He glanced guiltily at Nicky.

'Was it a bad one?' asked Nicky.

'The dear old rheumatics,' said Uncle Algy. 'Faithful friends they are, never leave me alone

for long.' He grinned defiance. 'Dunno what I'd do without 'em. But listen to this, boy: For sale freehold with vacant possession all that desirable property known as the Ridge Farm, Saffron Ridge, near Keyborough, in the county of Mershire, comprising about one hundred acres of grass and plough, together with the large and commodious residence thereto pertaining with all barns, sheds, outhouses and other buildings . . .'

'Oho!' said Nicky gaily. 'They're selling it, are they?' He looked over his uncle's shoulder. 'And by auction too!'

'You're right, boy. By auction it is. And not for the first time. Man and boy I've seen that place change owners four mortal times. Here, you read what they say.' He sat back and rested for half a minute, while Nicky read through the notice of sale. Uncle Algy watched him excitedly. 'See here, boy. You'll come in for a tidy lil bit of cash from me some day, you and y'r dad.' Nicky scowled at the floor. 'Shut the window up, will you . . . *That's* better. Not enough to make you lazy: trust me. But a useful lil sum. *But*,' said Uncle Algy, 'I'm not in any hurry to get to heaven, thank you. No irreverence meant. And I've a fancy for seeing you folks a bit settled and comfortable *now*, if you follow my meaning. That's

why we're going to look over the old place 'smorning.'

'Do you mean,' began Nicky, flushed and shy, 'do you mean——'

'I mean,' said Uncle Algy, chuckling and winking, 'we'll mebbe pick up a cheap pig or two, or a smart lil waggon, against the time when you have a farm to keep 'em on. That's all, boy. Just an idea of mine, just a passing thought. No schemes, you understand, no schemes. No, no, no!'

The car stopped. Tom Meadows, stiff and sulky, stood holding the door open. Towards Uncle Algy, but not at him, he looked with angry deference. Nicky had noticed that these two constantly grumbled at each other like old friends. To-day Uncle Algy was on the defensive: his glance at Tom was half timid, half impudent.

The moment Nicky's feet touched ground Tom shut the door on his employer. Uncle Algy stared indignantly. He tried bluster. 'Now Tom! Mind y'r manners.'

'That's all right, Mr Pandervil. I'll show Mr Nicholas round for you.'

'No such thing. Open the door and give me a hand out. Think I'm going to miss the party, and on me birthday too! Never heard such stuff.' He gave Nicky a confidential wink. 'Not really me

birthday, y'know. That's only my lil joke. Well, Tom Meadows, are you going to do as I tell ye, or must I come and box y'r ears?'

Tom, unrelenting, wouldn't even grin. 'You know as well as me what doctor said.'

With a rueful grin Uncle Algy surrendered. 'A rare bully is our Tom. Didja know that, Nicky? Take a good look round, boy. And if you see any lil thing you fancy, a rake or a mowing machine or a couple of milking stools, just speak up and I'll see you get 'em. Money's no object.' He lay back among his cushions, rumbling with laughter. But by the time Nicky returned to him his mood had changed. 'Wish y'r dear dad could a bin with us to-day. Bad business him not able to come.'

'Dad! Was he to have come too!'

'Well, I wrote 'im a letter. One of my breezy letters, y' know, not saying much but giving 'im a lil bit of a nudge on the sly, if you take me. But seems he's bin seedy, y'r dad has, and won't venture out again yet.'

Nicky glared at his uncle accusingly. 'Dad's been ill! Why the devil didn't someone tell *me!* Hell, do they think I'm not interested in such things? What's wrong with him, uncle?'

'Eh, boy, don't excite y'rself. Touch of flu, that's all. Better now, he says. A good 'eal better.

But not better enough to come with us to-day, more's the pity.'

Uncle Algy stared out of the window with dismal eyes. He was suddenly dispirited. Getting tired, thought Nicky; he'll be better for a meal. Rotten trick of Harold's, not letting on that Dad was ill. Blast. Blast . . . These blastings were designed to raise a dust of irrelevant anger in which he could hide from himself his anxiety about Egg. Flu at his age is serious, he couldn't help saying; and he thought of death and wished people didn't have to die. By people he meant other people, and especially old people; for that he himself shared this mortality was a notion he could seldom—and at this moment not at all—seriously entertain. He, by an astonishing piece of luck, was young, and only yesterday he had been in the presence of eternal light: a phrase that at last held a definite meaning for him. Instantly and with a sigh of adoration recalling that face seen in church, and saying in his heart O Jane O Jane, he began to think that perhaps there was something real behind all that talk, to which he had listened so often and often so impatiently, about God and the Grace of God and the peace that passes understanding: something real, but certainly not the something that the Ebenezerites

meant by it. Who is she, and how can I get to know her? Lovely, heavenly, an angel. Her darkness, the lovely darkness shining out of her. The way her eyes looked down, and her mouth, and when she flung her head back, and her beautiful chin like . . . like . . . How can I get to know her? A tune ran in his head, and scraps of poetry floated up from his memory. Impetuous heart, be still, be still: thy sorrowful love can never be told. I must get to know her soon. Next Sunday. No, to-morrow. I wonder if I'll be back in time to-night: I could just slip over to Upridge on the chance of finding out where she lives. And her name's Jane—perfect! Jane—it couldn't be anything else. There must be dozens in love with her; she's sure to be married or engaged or something. O Lord if I lose her! This very moment someone may be cutting me out, while I'm tied by the leg here. Still I shouldn't stand a chance anyhow, lovely girl like that. Black despair fell on him, but he soon went on planning how he could meet her.

'Did you speak, uncle?'

'Eh?' Uncle Algy was peevish.

'I thought you said something.'

'No.' He fussed with his watch. 'Late if he don't look lively. Tom! Hi, Tom Meadows! . . .' He tried to get on to his feet to reach the speak-

ing tube, failed, and sank back with a fierce grunt. 'Tell him, can't you! Rap on the thingummy.'

'But we're almost there now, uncle. See, it's only half-past twelve, and we're within ten minutes of Mercester. Sale's not till two, you know.' Seeing his uncle grow calmer he tried to comfort him further by talking of food. 'Don't know how *you* feel, but I'm ready for lunch.'

'You c'n 'ave mine too,' grumbled Uncle Algy. 'I shan't eat anything.' But in this belief he was mistaken, for when the waiter at the Coach and Horses brought him, with a most flattering bow, the bill of fare, he began to be himself again. 'Now, nephew, we must make a good lunch. Can't go to battle on an empty belly. We must fortify the inner man, as I used to tell y'r aunt in the old days.' He recalled the waiter. 'George old friend! —fetch me a wine list, will ye? You look at one, Nick, and I'll look at t'other, so that we can make a real job of it and no time lost. Got it, George? That's the style!'

The waiter knew Mr Pandervil well, and perhaps it was that, as much as the prospect of food, that heartened the old man. Indeed everybody knew him in Mercester, and it was quite like old times to be sitting in the dining-room of the Coach and Horses (an altogether grander place than the

old Farmer's Rest had been even in its forgotten prime), nodding genially at this neighbour, cracking a loud joke with another, and having youngsters of fifty or sixty jump up at sight of him and come to his table to pay their respects. 'Old Pandervil! Quite an old cure!' That's what they said of him, as he well knew, for he had overheard such things more than once; and, with that knowledge snug and warm inside him, and being wide awake to the glances and smiles his presence kindled in the company, it hardly needed George's highly recommended Old Madeira to put a sparkle in his rheumy eye. 'Glad to see you, Mr Jones. And how's things with you, old friend? This is my nephew and heir, Mr Nicholas Pandervil. Say how d'ye do to Mr Jones, Nick. A good friend of mine is Mr Jones. Many a fine beast I've knocked down to Mr Jones. Hey, Mr Jones? . . . Ah, here's young Mr Kitto come to tell me how many beans make five. That's so, isn't it, my dear fellow? This is my nephew Nicholas, farmer like y'rself, and chip of the old block, as you see. My brother's youngest. Nick, a word in y'r ear, boy. Mr Kitto here knows what's what. Went and married the prettiest young lady in Mershire, the young scamp. *I* asked her first but she dint hear me, so now she's Mrs Kitto.' He gave Kitto a

confidential nudge. 'Only my fun, old friend.' A third acquaintance came into view. ' 'Pon my word if it isn't Mr Jennings! Glass o' wine, Mr Jennings. Glass of wine, Mr Jones. Now don't run away, Mr Kitto my dear boy, come and have a glass o' wine. George! Where's George! . . . We'll drink a health or two,' explained Uncle Algy, with a knowing wink at Nicky. 'We'll drink success to the sale. Eh, Nick?'

So deeply engrossed did Uncle Algy become in talking and drinking with his cronies that he didn't offer to stir from his seat till Tom Meadows came to help him down to the billiard room, where the sale was on the point of beginning. Arranged as it was now, with rows of deal benches facing the auctioneer, the room reminded Nicky of the Ebenezer Sunday School, a resemblance strengthened by the solemn silence in which the auctioneer and his congregation stared at each other for a few preliminary seconds. There was but a sprinkling of people: nobody, it seemed, greatly cared to whom or for what price the Ridge Farm would be sold. And when the bidding began—'one thousand three, one thousand four, one thousand four, one thousand four, I'll take fifties, one thousand four fifty, and five to you, sir? one thousand five'—Uncle Algy, so little was he impressed (the know-

ing fellow!), found time to whisper caustic comments into Nicky's ear. 'Poor chap, he's new to it. Slow, very slow. I'd like to shew him how, I'd just like to shew him how. Half asleep the folks are, and no wonder. Doesn't know what he's about. Thinks he's bathing the baby by the sound of 'im. Hushabye baby on the tree-tops. That's not the way to sell a farm.' But presently his monologue died away, and people began to look round at him. There were audible whispers. 'Mr Pandervil's bidding.'

To Mr Pandervil the property was finally knocked down. 'That bit of money I spoke of, nephew: you'll find it three thousand pounds short when you come to count it. And the farm's yours, boy.' He could hardly speak in his excitement, but with Tom and Nicky each lending him an arm he struggled to his feet again.

The auctioneer's clerk came, followed by the auctioneer himself eager to pay a compliment to his ancient rival. 'Don't disturb yourself, Mr Pandervil.'

Uncle Algy, as slowly as he had risen, sat down. 'Mr Nicholas, my nephew and heir. Never so happy in all my life.'

'Very gratified to see you here, sir. Congratulate you on securing a fine little property.'

Nicky, staring with mild curiosity at the author of these civilities, and liking the fellow, was surprised by the laugh with which Uncle Algy responded to it. It was a sibilant mirthless laugh; harsh and hard; and it went on and on. Looking quickly round, Nicky stammered out: 'Why, whatever . . . I say!' Uncle Algy's head was flung backwards across the back of his chair; his eyes were wide and staring; and from his mouth, which hung dribbling open, came a curiously mechanical noise like that of sawing.

They lowered him to the ground, loosened his collar, poured brandy into his mouth from Tom Meadows's pocket flask. They did all the usual things. And when he was dead the two young men for whom he was something more than a tedious or whimsical old fellow met each other's eyes. Tom Meadows, it seemed, had not yet forgotten his grievance. 'I *told* 'im so!' grumbled Tom. 'That stubborn 'e was, he wouldn't listen.' For a moment he stared crossly at the dead distorted face; then, turning convulsively away, he burst into a loud blubbering.

4

Nicky's fancy that he and Jane had been made for each other was already become a deep-rooted

habit of his mind. It was irrational and indefensible, but he stuck to it; and though, like every other lover, he tormented himself with the possibility of losing her, telling himself a hundred times a day that he wasn't worthy to be in the same world with such perfection as hers, he nevertheless thought of her already as his betrothed and sometimes even pictured her—mad presumption!—as his wife. To discover who she was and where she lived had proved no very difficult task. He seized the first opportunity of sneaking into Upridge Church when it was empty and examining the pew she had occupied with her mother (for surely it was her mother); and there, on the little disc of identification such as marked each of the rented pews, he read the name *Marsh.* This excited but did not content him: the evidence was not conclusive. He shamelessly pried into the flyleaves of the various devotional books that lay on the pew-ledge, and in one of them, a New Testament, was written in a prim schoolgirlish hand: *Eleanor Jane Marsh. 1907.* Jane! That's her! And that was her handwriting four years ago—how delicious! Not always, now, was he so surely stirred by his thoughts of her: it needed, in fact, some concrete thing, some vestige of contact such as this scrap of her handwriting offered, to convince him of her

reality; for of late the idea of her, that daydream at first so bright, had shone more dimly and required a more conscious rekindling. The suddenness of his uncle's death had shaken and bewildered Nicky, and for some few days after that event death had seemed the only fact worth taking any account of. To be alive and happy one moment, and dead the next—it made a mockery of everything. He looked with new eyes on his fellow creatures: doomed creatures, every one of them, and himself doomed too. Why do we put up with it! Why do we go on living and wanting to live, when at any moment this stupid horrible thing may happen to any one of us! It's like . . . it's like . . . like walking a tightrope over a precipice and knowing you'll fall sooner or later, perhaps this very minute, perhaps to-morrow. What's the use, then, of making plans and looking forward! And why—again he came back to that unanswerable absurd question—why do we put up with it, how can we bear it? Everyone knows the rope will break or he'll lose his balance or something, but we all go on pretending to forget it, pretending that it's worth while going on. It's a kind of crazy conspiracy, and we're all in it. Death's real, he said, death's permanent; and everything else is only a sort of game we play to stop ourselves thinking

about it. He didn't know that anyone had made this discovery before him, and he wondered at the blindness of the world, wondered how it was that this knowledge of death, the knowledge that is man's bitter privilege, did not poison for everyone, as it was doing for him, every minute of existence. But no sooner was the funeral over than he began to neglect the verdict of his logic, and to take the same unreasonable pleasure in being alive as he had taken before this ugly intrusion. He still asked sometimes why people consented to go on living on such humiliating terms; but meanwhile he himself fell into step with them; vital impulses drew his thoughts back from the encompassing darkness into our circle of candlelight. He remembered that he was in love, or thought he was—for now, in his most honest moments, he wasn't quite sure which. His pursuit of Jane's identity was carried out rather in the hope than in the certainty that she was as necessary to him as he chose to believe her; but now, sitting where she had sat that first time he saw her, and seeing the name, her own name, that her own hand had written—O Jane, his heart whispered, O my Jane!

The gods are said to look with disfavour on such extravagant presumption as Nicky's, and to punish the offender. But Nicky they indulged, not

punished; contriving that he and Jane Marsh should happen upon each other in the church porch one Sunday evening, and so long after the beginning of evensong they had not the effrontery to go into the church.

And now—or never—he must speak to her. 'I'm afraid it's late.'

Taken by surprise, she looked at him with question in her glance. 'Yes.'

'Too late to go in, I mean.'

'Yes.'

That conversation was over. Nicky thought he had never seen anything so certainly finished, so dead and buried and hopeless of resurrection, as that conversation. But presently he tried again: 'Er . . . I've often seen you in church.'

Perhaps it was surprise that made her hesitate before responding. 'Have you?' She glanced quickly away. Her voice, though not unfriendly, was cool; its impersonality seemed to rebuke him. He wanted to say: 'Well, since we're too late for church, let's go somewhere else and have a talk.' That was clearly impossible, and equally impossible were all the alternatives he could think of. He felt awed, shy, apologetic, afraid of being thought an impudent fellow. He stared with troubled eyes at his boots, resolving to say no more

and wondering whether he had best clear off at once. The silence became an intolerable embarrassment, but no sooner had he conceived the idea of instant flight than indecision paralysed him. Whether to say good-bye or to go without a word, that was the question. The first seemed cheeky, the second uncivil. Yet he felt he would go crazy if he had to stand here much longer, awkward and self-accusingly silent in her presence. His not looking at her was surely, he thought, as insulting now as his looking had been before. He dragged himself a few feet away and pretended to be trying to read the parish notices, which were posted on the wall. So occupied, he heard her voice.

'I beg . . . Did you say . . . ?'

'In the ruin,' she repeated. 'There's a nest there with young ones in.'

It was sudden, but he rallied his wits. 'Oh, birds. Do you mean birds?'

'Yes. Finches, I think. It was looking at them made me so late. I simply daren't go in now, dare you?'

'No fear,' said Nicky, with enthusiasm. 'Where did you say the birds were?'

'In the ruin.'

For a moment, blankness; then Nicky remembered that behind the present church, with only a

few yards of grass intervening, there stood an ancient ruin, roofless, ivy-covered, and believed to be a thousand years old. 'Oh I know. The ruined church.' She faintly smiled, perhaps at his slowness, perhaps recalling the sight of the nestlings. 'I wonder,' said Nicky, 'if I could find it. The nest I mean.' A wonderful hope dawned in his mind. 'Could you . . .'

'Yes, I'll tell you where to find it.' She stepped out of the porch, the better to direct him. His hope became dim, but he quickly joined her. 'It's on the outside of the big wall. That'll be . . . that'll be the south wall, won't it?' O desolation! His hope was quenched. 'The nest's about as high as me, so I've built a sort of platform to stand on, with some of the old bricks lying about there.' She pointed him the way; and at sight of her standing in the sunlight, facing him unselfconsciously, one hand shading her eyes and the other pointing towards the ruined church, he had the sensation of being in a world beyond time and space, the thought flashing upon him: I shall never forget this, never; and, in the moment of her moving, that picture of her became for him imperishable.

She lowered her arm and turned slightly away as if in dismissal, and the gesture so deeply agitated

him that he tried, desperately, one more cast of the net. 'I suppose you couldn't come and *show* me. I mean come and help me find it.'

She hesitated, shyly but not for long: for long enough only to make her consenting, when it came, a surprise as well as a rapture.

She set off through the churchyard, leaving him to follow. Her haste must mean, he thought, that she found his persistence tiresome and was anxious to be rid both of this task he had set her and of him. While he hurried after her he was planning to say something in extenuation of his conduct. But he happily forgot this plan when he saw her mount that step of piled bricks and heard her whisper 'Yes, here they are!' She jumped down, so that Nicky could take her place; and for an instant he almost forgot her in the first quick queer pleasure of seeing a cluster of small bird-mouths wide and confidingly open. He stared for a few seconds.

'Five of 'em,' he said, glancing down at the girl. He had forgotten his shyness. 'Aren't they rummy things?' He grinned delightedly. 'They think everyone's their mother.'

She smiled. 'Little sillies!'

Nicky got down from the steps, feeling that he was on the threshold of heaven. The moment's

perfection made him tremble. The sun was going down; the grass, to his senses, was darker than it had been five minutes earlier; and against that greenness Jane's white frock seemed to glow with her own light. The evening was full of those small remote sounds that are the breath of silence. Jane, her eyes big with listening, gazed at distance. Nicky gazed at her. He knew in this moment that hitherto his being in love with her had been three-parts make-believe: now it was real beyond question. Excited by the discovery he suddenly blurted out: 'I hope you didn't mind my speaking to you like that?' The question was not quite sincere, for he felt pretty sure she hadn't minded. And yet . . . he wasn't sure: he dared not be sure of anything but that she was perfect and he a clumsy fellow. A clumsy fellow indeed, he thought, and wished he hadn't asked her that stupid question, by which, he feared, he had thrown away his advantage, detroyed at a touch the intimacy that a shared pleasure had brought naturally into being. She glanced at him without answering, as though she didn't understand or as though his silliness had disappointed her. He could not be sure which of these two things her glance meant, but goaded by it into justifying himself he became filled with the courage of madness and said: ' It may have seemed

a bit cheeky. But it wasn't really, because I'm in love with you.'

She looked at him quickly, and as quickly looked away. 'What a funny thing to say!'

'Why?' demanded Nicky. He was bolder than ever now, for he saw that though taken by surprise she was not angry; above all, she didn't disbelieve him.

She shrugged her shoulders, half turning her back on him. There was a hint of petulance in the movement. 'Well, it *is*. That's why.'

Had he made a fool of himself? The fear added a suggestion of sulkiness to his voice. 'Funny or not, it's true. I'm most fearfully in love with you.' He wished the statement had not sounded so much like an ultimatum, a take-it-or-leave-it. He wanted above all to be eloquent, to tell her how beautiful she was, and how she had transfigured the world for him; he wanted to say that if he won her he would go crazy with joy, and that if he lost her she would still remain always the only meaning life could have for him. He could not say these things; his sense of having spoken too soon, and ineptly, robbed him of the power to do anything but blunder into a kind of quarrelsomeness. He felt as though he were made of wood: ungainly in movement, jerky in

speech, incredibly clumsy in tactics. 'I say, do you believe me?' No answer. 'Hang it all, what's funny about it! I *am* in love with you, I tell you.'

Even then she delayed answering. She stood and stared at the ample curves of the horizon; interlocking and unlocking her fingers; and listening, but not, apparently, to what he said. From the church came the sound of chanting, to add one more touch of unreality to this experience, which was yet, in spite of everything, the most real experience Nicky had ever known.

He had all but lost hope of getting an answer out of her when she turned to him suddenly. 'But it's absurd. You don't know me. And I don't know you.'

Her voice was impatient, but behind the impatience there was something else, something in her tone and in her look that gave him hope.

'I *do* know you,' he protested. 'I've known for a month, exactly a month, that you're lovelier than anything else I've ever seen. What more is there to know than that!' She began studying the hills again. 'And I know your name too. It's Jane!' He made the statement excitedly, as though challenging her to deny it. 'So you see I do know you. And this evening we've talked, and we looked

at those birds together, so why can't we be friends? Well, we *are* friends, anyhow.'

'There's no call to be so cross about it,' said Jane. She gave a little laugh that set his heart dancing. 'Who told you my name?'

'No one told me. I found out. I simply had to find out. And mine's Nicky. Nicholas Pandervil.'

Now that she stood face to face with him, smiling amusedly, he lost his courage and could think of no more that he dared say. Her laugh, by opening the door to friendship, had made her mistress of the situation; and her smile made him blush for the impulsive storm of words that had provoked it. He felt that she was a good deal older and wiser than he, though he swore that she couldn't be a day over twenty and he was well over twenty-two.

5

The White Hart was the older, if not the better, of Keyborough's two inns; and the room chosen for the accommodation of Egg and Nicky was the landlord's special pride: a large low-ceiled room very rich in old oak, mellow with history, and slightly conscious, thought Nicky, of the handsome brick fireplace with which its present master had provided it. An illustrious somebody had once

slept in this room, either a runaway king or a popular highwayman, for the story varied; and that deep cut in the window-sill had been made by the sword of Prince Charlie himself. Egg liked the room: its spaciousness impressed and delighted him. He liked the two neat little beds, and the log fire (such an extravagance at this time of the year); and he liked, above all, the prospect of sleeping here in the company of Nicky, who was at this very moment watching him out of his eye-corner, as they said in Mershire, and waiting anxiously for a sign of pleasure from him.

'A fine room, upon my word!'

'D'you like it, Dad?'

'Like it? Should think I do! Never slept in such a room in all my life. And a racketting big charge they make for it, I'll be bound.'

Nicky grinned with satisfaction. 'Not so much. Yes, it's a good room. But there are some pretty good rooms at the Ridge, aren't there?'

'I dare say. Me and y'r Uncle Algy had a biggish one between us, I seem to remember. But it's more than a bit since I saw the place. Hardly know it, I shan't.'

Egg became lost in silence, ruminating upon the marvel of this return to the scene of his boyhood. Two hours ago he had stepped out of the London

train at Mercester station, whence he had been brought in a taxi—for this was a day of joyous and unbridled extravagance—to the White Hart; and tomorrow, in the same or another taxi, he would be taken to see over his son's farm. It was three months since his brother Algy's death, and he had not yet shaken off the load of melancholy it had burdened him with. It had made him think of all the other losses he had suffered in recent years, particularly those of his old friend Farthing, neighbour Pummice, and Carrie. The loss of Algy was less grievous than those, for indeed he had never been on very intimate terms with Algy, and the two for so many years had lived each his separate life that they met, and met rarely, almost as strangers, with only family sentiment and a sense of old times to bind them together. Perhaps that was why Egg had failed—foolishly, as he now thought—to expect his brother's death. He reproached himself for not having taken the trouble to see Algy oftener, and felt a bitter compunction when he remembered how, the summer before, spending a fortnight at that Old Vicarage of Algy's, he had found his exuberance a little trying, his heartiness monotonous: his company, in fine, a tax on patience. But it don't matter now. Nothing matters. Nothing matters except Nicky. The puzzle of it was that

he had always had, in his absence, a real affection for Algy; at a distance that geniality had always been heart-warming, irresistible; it was now a poignant memory.

'I can't realize it even now,' said Egg, speaking his thought. 'Y'r Uncle Algy being gone I mean. It don't seem to make sense somehow. So full of fun as he was! Such a talker!' (For we persist in our naive habit of expecting Death to be more discriminating in his choice of victims than he has ever yet been.) 'I wish I'd seen a bit more of him, poor old chap.' Meeting Nicky's glance Egg was startled to think by how little he himself was younger than Algy. They call *me* a poor old chap, I shouldn't wonder. But I've got Nicky, and Nicky's got a farm. He stretched his thin hands towards the fire, for he suddenly felt cold, or thought he did, although it was summertime. 'So everything's settled to rights, my boy?'

'Yes,' said Nicky. 'There's been a lot of fuss and palaver, but everybody's been pretty decent about things, from Ambrose down to the solicitor johnny.' He began telling his father in detail the story that he had summarized in his letters: how, within an hour of Uncle Algy's death, Ambrose the auctioneer had whispered with a sympathetic and deprecating grimace: 'Mr Nicholas Pandervil,

would you mind stepping this way, sir? . . . I think I understood the late deceased gentleman to say that you were his heir. Yes? Ah yes. And my clerk is under the impression that this purchase was being made on your behalf. Is that so? Splendid. I have to ask these questions, Mr Pandervil, for in the ordinary way we might have to put up the property again in a case like this, if you see what I mean. Now may I take it, Mr Pandervil, that you intend to see the matter through? Ah you do. Very happy I'm sure. And your legal adviser would be . . . ?' Uncle Algy's solicitor proved to be 'a very good friend of ours, Mr Pandervil. Very happy I'm sure.'

Egg listened attentively to the story. 'Generous fellow y'r uncle. If only he coulda seen you settled down in y'r own farmhouse, he'd a bin as pleased as pleased . . . It's a queer feeling,' he went on, meaning it was queer to think that to-morrow he would be seeing the old place again. Some shyness made him leave the sentence unfinished, and he filled the gap by saying, half to himself: 'Well now you've a farm you'll be wanting a wife I spose, eh?'

Nicky parried with a grin. 'Better go to the Cattle Show to-morrow and see if we can find a likely one.' Egg took the chaff goodhumouredly,

and Nicky couldn't resist elaborating his theme. 'A tall girl, don't you think? And strong of course —lots of work she'll have to do. Tall, about five feet six or five feet seven, what d'you say, Dad? Not too plump and not skinny. And black hair, or dark at any rate. None of your auburn stuff: it might clash with the butter. Black hair drawn back from the forehead and done up into a jug handle at the nape; rather prim and Quakerish, you know, but eyes very lively when they want to be.' He broke off, fearing that he was giving himself away.

'I see you've got the right idea,' said Egg, entering into the game. 'Ay, I like the sound of that well enough. But looks aren't everything, Nicky. Make sure you get a kind one, boy. It's a long business, is marriage.'

'Is she kind as she is fair?' quoted Nicky, still grinning so that he should not look as solemn as he felt. 'For beauty lives with kindness.'

Egg nodded, giving his son a searching glance. 'That's true. Who told you that now? It's true enough, I'm sure.'

'Shakespeare said it first. Let's have another log on the fire, shall we?'

Egg's eyes kindled. 'First fire I've ever seen in June. Tisn't a cold day either. You can't call

it really cold. Yes I like that bit you said just now. I knew a bit of Shakespeare myself once. Got it by heart I did.' There was pride in him now.

'Did you?'

'Ay. Something about the lily, pause to mark the lily, and praise the deep . . . something in the rose: it's gone now these many years. But I had it by heart once.' A feeling of tiredness came suddenly upon him. 'Well, I rather think I'll be turning in to bed. How d'you feel, my boy? Not ready for bed yet, I spose.'

'Oh, ready enough. I expect you're tired, Dad, after the journey.'

The old man was already getting out of his clothes. 'Not really tired. Well, p'raps a little. But not sleepy.' And, when presently he climbed into his bed, he repeated almost anxiously: 'I'm not sleepy, you know. We can go on talking, there's plenty to say yet. I shan't go to sleep for an hour or two, I fancy. But I just want to have a lie down.'

Nicky sat still for five minutes longer, finishing a cigarette. 'How do Harold and Lily hit it off together nowadays?' he asked, rising from his chair at last. There was no answer. Tiptoeing across the room, he saw that Egg was fast asleep.

He himself was soon in bed, thinking of Jane

and wondering whether her mother, that time he went to tea with them, had liked him or not. He was alive to the importance of being liked by Jane's mother. She had seemed friendly enough, but could appearances be trusted? And what of Jane herself? There was no serious doubt in his mind of her friendliness, but beyond that he knew nothing. She was always serenely pleased to see him, and that, so far as he could see, was the beginning and end of it. Comparing Jane with her mother, a small brown-haired woman quiet but alert, he decided that the girl must take after her father, a prosperous farmer of whom nothing more was known to Nicky than that he had been killed in the Boer War after serving six months as a Volunteer. For the twelve years since his death they had lived quietly at Upridge in a house whose atmosphere, created by Mrs Marsh, was that of old-fashioned and modest gentility. Nicky had never experienced anything quite like it before; it had for him the charm of an old print, the musty but evocative fragrance of pressed flowers; but he was vaguely uneasy to observe how Jane seemed to be assimilated by this atmosphere and so become less accessible to him. This quiet feminine world in which she lived with her mother, this world serene and a little sleepy—it had undeniable charm for

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a spectator, but it was no place, thought Nicky jealously, for a fine strong lovely girl like Jane, whose filial devotion at once enchanted and angered him. It made him guilty to know that he was trying to break into this domestic peace, bringing division where there was now nothing (it seemed) but placid affection; and the shame of that guilt made him the more fierce in his determination to steal the girl from her mother. He thought of marriage as though it had been a kind of treachery he was planning, for the urgency of his love made him impatient that anyone else should have a claim on her. And now he began wondering how much or how little of his hopes he should confide to his father, who couldn't, he felt, be expected to understand. He must have been in love some time or another, but he'll have forgotten what it feels like by now, and say I'm too young or some stuff. I wonder what he'd think of Jane if he saw her. With these last thoughts he drifted into sleep and did not wake until roused by strong sunlight and the sound of water being splashed into a basin.

'Hullo, farmer!' said Egg. 'I'm up first, you see.'

Egg was in high spirits: unnaturally high spirits, thought Nicky, for so early in the morning. He hoped he wouldn't over-excite himself, and the

implied fear found its justification soon enough in the feverish gleam that lit the old man's eye as he sat back in the cab watching the hedges fly past. Nicky was excited, too, though not for quite the same reasons as Egg had.

Being on the point of making dangerous conversation, he felt almost breathless with stage-fright. Yet his voice sounded sufficiently cool when at last he began: 'Do you remember Upridge?'

'Eh? Upridge?' Egg looked blankly, but wouldn't admit ignorance of anything in Mershire. 'Yes, I remember. Let me see . . .' His tactics were successful; having gained time he now did indeed remember that there had been a village of that name somewhere on the fringe of his boyhood's world. 'You mean the village?'

What else was there to mean? There was only one Upridge and that a village. Nicky saw through his father's deception. Poor old Dad, he's forgotten. 'Yes. Jolly little village. Quite near Crabbe's place, you know. I sometimes went over there to church on Sunday evenings.'

'Went to church, did you? Yes, I remember you saying in one of your letters about going to church. Well I used to go to church myself in the old days at the Ridge. It was y'r poor mother got me into the chapel. Y'r granddad Pandervil would no

more a thought of going inside a chapel than of making his own bed.'

Nicky nodded appreciation. 'I don't blame him. Do you?'

'Me and y'r uncles used to take it by turns. When we could be spared, for there's always something to be doing on a farm, off we'd go with Flisher or Sarah to church. The Guv'nor dint go but on special days. He stayed at home and shut himself up with his books. A rare one for books, and a head for 'em too. I sometimes fancy you're a bit like him, Nicky. He'd have thought the world of you, my boy. Moren he ever did of us lot.' Egg shone with pride in being so richly excelled by his son.

Upridge seemed forgotten, but Nicky took care to come back to it. 'I met some people at Upridge. Church people. At least they go to church now and again. I think the mother comes of Quaker stock.'

'What sort of folks are they? You dint tell me you'd met anybody new, as I can remember.'

'Their name's Marsh.' Nicky was already wishing he hadn't begun this difficult story.

'Young fellow like yourself, I spose? Is he a farmer too?'

'There aren't any men. Sort of hen party.'

Nicky contrived to laugh. 'Just mother and daughter living by themselves.'

'H'm!' Egg waited to hear more.

'Quite nice people,' said Nicky. 'Been very decent to me.'

'How did you meet 'em?'

'Oh, I just met them. Sort of got to know the daughter.' He tried to make the talk more general. 'Funny how you meet people, isn't it. A chance word or two and so on.' Egg gravely agreed, his heart warm; and Nicky, encouraged by his gravity, could not forbear telling him: 'There were some birds nesting in the wall of the old church, the ruined one. And we got into conversation about it.'

'You and Mrs Marsh. I see,' said Egg innocently, with hardly a smile.

'Not Mrs Marsh. Her daughter it was. Jane, they call her.'

A good name that, thought Egg. Jane Marsh: a good honest name. 'Sounds a pleasant body, this Jane.'

'She is,' agreed Nicky: not with enthusiasm, but rather with the air of one determined to be just. 'Oh, quite pleasant. And quite young. A child almost. Only just twenty, I think they said.'

'She'll be pretty, I dare say,' ventured Egg.

'In a way,' Nicky agreed. 'Pretty's not exactly

the word. But good-looking, yes. You might almost say beautiful.'

'Tall, I expect?' suggested Egg.

'Yes, tall and sort of fine-looking.' He was warming to his theme. 'The kind of face a sculptor would be attracted to. A sculptor rather than a painter, if you know what I mean. There's something very open and generous about it, and yet . . . oh, I dunno. What I was going to say was they've been pretty decent to me, asked me to tea and sort of took an interest, lonely young man and all that. I thought it might be the polite thing if we were to run them over to see this farm of ours.'

Egg was taken aback for a moment. 'What, this morning?'

'Oh, not if you'd rather not. I could tell the driver to turn at the toll-gate and take a short cut through Winsted Rising. But it was only a passing thought of mine. We'll not bother now.'

After a silence Egg said suddenly: 'I like the sound of that young woman. Jane, d'ye call her? Tell me more about her, won't you?'

'Told all I know,' said Nicky.

'You said she was tall, didn't you?'

'Tallish.' Nicky stared out of the window. 'Toll gates,' he remarked, desperate to say something.

'About five foot six?' asked Egg with a twinkle.

'Oh, about that, I spose.'

'And lots of black hair, dint you say? And pulls it straight back from her forehead and does it in a little bun at the back. Eh?'

Nicky blushed in meeting his father's glance. 'Now how the dickens did you know that, Dad?' he asked, though he knew well enough.

'Never you mind!' said Egg. 'Have I got it right?'

'Near enough. But how——!' He still had to pretend.

Egg jumped up, put his head out of the window, and shouted to the driver. The car stopped. 'D'you know Upridge, young man? Well, you'll have to turn and go back a step or two. Back to the toll-gate, d'ye see? . . . And then take the road through Winsted Rising.'

'But I say!' Nicky took alarm, seeing his plan put so unexpectedly into effect. 'Do you think we'd better? It's another twenty miles pretty near. And she's—they're not expecting me. They may be out.'

All the way to Upridge Nicky was restless and preoccupied, hardly answering when spoken to. Egg, stealthily watching him, suffered and rejoiced. He did not for many minutes share his

son's anxiety, for the years had not taught him pessimism, and seeing that Nicky was in love with this Jane he had no doubt at all that he would win her. His only fear, which he dared not boldly face, was that she should bring trouble to her lover; and when she alone, and not her mother, was handed into the cab—for it all fell out as Nicky had recklessly planned—she was so touchingly shy, and Nicky so awkward and so radiant, that Egg hadn't the heart to take careful stock of her. He thought on the whole he liked her looks, but now, the prospect of seeing the Ridge Farm being so near, he was glad enough to absent himself in spirit for a while from these young people, who looked as eagerly forward as he looked wistfully back, and to indulge his many memories.

The car began climbing Saffron Ridge, and a quietness enclosed him into which the voices of his companions could not penetrate; but, when the time came for him to get out, nothing was left in him but an expectant curiosity. It was all so long ago, that past in which he had been living for a strange hour or so, that he could not identify himself, as yet, with the young fellow he remembered; it was easier far to identify himself with Nicky, in whose life his own was so marvellously and at times sensibly extended. Yet, entering the farmhouse

kitchen, he was startled almost into asking 'Where's Mother?' And, going to the window, from which the cobbled yard was visible, he stood gazing and forgetful at his vanished boyhood, scarcely rousing when Nicky said: 'Sit down for a bit, Dad. I'll show Jane the rest of the house while you're resting.' There was sunlight in the yard, and Egg, unfastening the window with fingers that remembered even more than he did, stretched out his hands towards it. He leaned out, slantwise, to get a glimpse of the dairy, of which the door stood half-open: a sight that kept him staring for a long while, longer than he knew, till at last he caught himself expecting to see his young sister, Felicia, come out of that dairy carrying an empty pail hung from her arm and screwing up her eyes in the strong sunlight. That barn's new. Spoils the place, that barn does. There was no one in the yard: it was deserted; no life except the life his memory peopled it with. His eyes saw what they saw, but into his mind crowded the fields beyond, the cart-track between two high hedges, the orchard, the twelve-acre plough, the green valley, and the long slope to the field they had called Flinders; and he was again with his brothers, ploughing, scything, trimming hedges, loading hay. It was strange, marvellous, and at the last

unbelievable, that that had once been real, a living present reality, and now was nothing but an old tale. . . .

He turned at a sound in the room behind him, and, seeing a young man and a young woman come smiling towards him, he made as if to cover his eyes with his hand, as though fending off the intrusion.

'Hullo, Dad! Sorry we were so long away.' Nicky stared anxiously. 'Not feeling bad, are you?'

His son's voice recalled him. 'No, no, my boy. I'm right enough.' He noticed that the boy and the girl were hand in hand, and he guessed them to be full of their tremendous secret. He smiled, looking from one to the other.

The two came nearer. 'Jane and I——' said Nicky, and no more words would come.

'That's a good boy!' Egg gave them each a trembling hand. He was proud and glad. But when his glance came to rest at last on Jane, whom pride and gladness had transfigured, his eyes dimmed and the pain of unbearable beauty shot through his heart. All the years of his life were distilled into one sweet, one bitter drop. I must get away, I can't bear any more of it. He longed to be safe back in his shop at Farringay.

CHAPTER THE FOURTH

THE WAITING

I

Pansy, the most ladylike of cows, had sprained her leg and was suffering. She stood in the near orchard meekly enduring the attentions of her two masters. 'Come along, my beauty!' said old Egg Pandervil; and gently, but with a secret rapture of which his son Nicky was more than half-aware, he applied a handful of yellow ointment to the swollen joint and began rubbing it in. 'You're a wonder, Dad!' But it did not need Nicky's remark, which he cunningly pretended not to hear, to make Egg happy, for nowadays everything was conspiring to his happiness. He was in Mershire; his son was a farmer, and he was the father of his son: that was enough. After half a century of exile he was back where he belonged, living on the very soil he had himself farmed as a lad, and moving among sounds and smells and beasts that were like the incidents of an old beloved story miraculously made actual. And it gave him profound satisfaction to know himself—despite the variety of new habits learned during that exile—still countryman enough, and farmer enough, to do

more for Pansy than ever that smart young vet at Mercester could have done. Nothing to do but put the poor creature out of its pain—that, he told Nicky, was what they all said, and that was what this fellow would say if he were given a chance. 'Steady, my lass!' murmured Egg. 'I'm making it well again, that's what I'm doing.' Continuing the massage, he rested his head gratefully against the cow's flank. The smell of the animal was pleasant in his nostrils; her solid bulk reassured him; he was home again. Moreover, the cow was getting better, thereby affording one more piece of corroborative evidence that he hadn't lost his country nous. On days when strength assailed him he could plough as straight a furrow, build as fine a stack, and with bottle and shears as dexterously tend a maggoty sheep as young Nicky himself could. He would draw water from the deep well with never a sick glance—such as Nicky couldn't forbear giving—into that hideous hole; he would tar a fence with the enthusiasm of a child; and nothing pleased him better, in those early days, than to take a scythe and mow down a few of the thistles that disgracefully choked the valley meadow. At seventy-five his strength wasn't what it had been; but, though he could not do everything, he could do enough to feel that he was of some use to the

place. He was forever poking about the farm at Nicky's side, helping, advising, hindering maybe, with his 'Here, lemme have a go, Nicky!' and 'Now this is the way 'twas done in *my* time.' Nicky, admiring and teasing the old man in the same breath, divined at last the secret of this strange zest of his: it was that every fresh task yielded him not only proof of his capacity but the bitter-sweet delight of reminiscence. What Nicky could not know was the exact proportions in which were mixed the fancies, the feelings, and the history of which this reminiscence was compounded. More often than not there was no conscious memory of the past, but only a flavour, subtle and satisfying; though sometimes, with a bill-hook in his hand, or squatted in the byre and watching the milk warm from the udder spurt resonantly into the pail, Egg did play at pretending he was back for an instant in the past. Yet he was aware—now and again, but not often, mournfully aware—that the essential quality of that past eluded him. Everything looked the same, or nearly so; but everything was different. It was nothing—or at least it was no more than a little disconcerting—that where men in his time had mowed grass with a scythe and reaped corn with a sickle they now used a machine drawn by horses;

and nothing—except an occasion for genial sneering—that chemical manures were the fashion, and the rotation of crops a solemnly deliberated affair. The difference went deeper than that; it was in the very nature of things. Or was it, perhaps, in himself alone? Yet he did not think of himself as old, and it was sometimes the queerest thing to realize what a great gulf of years divided him from Nicky and Jane, and he caught himself wondering how and why he came to be pent in this old body, he and his rich treasure of memories. This new life bred strange thoughts, and none more strange than the fancy, only half playful, that his marriage and his life at Farringay were things that had never really happened. Yes, they had happened, but not so truly as things happened here on the farm; too real for a dream, maybe, but surely not real enough for full, waking life. Boyhood itself seemed less remote than that lifetime of grocering.

He stepped a pace back from the cow and regarded his work with satisfaction; then stooped, with grunting difficulty, to wipe his hands on a tuft of grass. The cow turned her large purple irises towards the two men; she did not look at them, but she saw them. Nicky for an instant idly wondered what slow dim thought or dream went on behind that bovine mask: precisely the kind of question

that Egg had once been in the habit of asking himself, but for a very long time now he had finished with such fancies and forgotten them. 'She's mending, my boy,' he said. Nicky agreed. 'Thanks to you, Dad.' And suddenly, out of nowhere as it seemed, there drifted into Egg's mind the beginning of a memory. He stood, staring at distance, listening to a silence in himself.

'What is it, Dad?'

'Funny,' said Egg, with a wondering smile. 'Something just popped into my head. A brother of mine. The eldest he was.'

'Not Uncle Algy,' asked Nicky.

'No, Algy was the middle one. The eldest. Now what did we call him? . . . Willy we called 'im. Sakes alive, I haven't thought of Willy for a many years. Now what should have put *him* into my head, I wonder!'

'Was that the brother that was killed at Inkerman?'

'Inkerman? Battle of Inkerman? Why, so it was. Wasn't much older than you, wasn't Willy, when a was killed. Queer, that is. If I was to meet him now, same as it might be in the next world as they say, young Willy'd be a mere nipper side of me, woont he?'

Nicky considered. 'I reckon he would. Rum

idea that. But I tell you what, Dad. You might not even recognize each other. How about that?'

'Not recognize him!' said Egg indignantly. 'Not recognize my own brother!' He stared blankly, and then added, with mild surprise in his voice: 'Well, I hadn't thought o' that. P'raps you're right.' He tried to recall Willy's image, but could find nothing but the faintest vaguest pencil sketch of a young man in a red coat. He felt puzzled and a little lonely. And he had a sense of the injustice of his predicament. He was the same Egg Pandervil as he had always been; however many years he had lived, he had not changed his identity, and the notion that young Willy, his elder brother, could regard him as an old man was absurd, though not quite absurd enough to be instantly dismissed. The old men of his own youth, with their white hairs and their bent backs, had seemed to be an alien race, almost an alien species, having little or nothing in common with his own; but now he knew, he had cause to know, better than that. Old or young, one felt much the same inside: perhaps nowadays less hopeful, less greedy, less expectant, but fundamentally the same, and, but for the aches and pains of the body and the tiresomeness of taking care of oneself, wonderfully contented.

Nicky said, as though reading his father's thoughts: 'You like being here, don't you?'

'Eh? Like being here?'

'Yes, here on the farm with Jane and me?' The boy spoke shyly, and turned away, afraid of his sentiment.

'Why, yes,' said Egg. 'What more could I want than this?'

'Yes, you're properly settled in now. Just at first I thought maybe the change was too much for you.'

'Nonsense!' Egg chose to forget that period of queer, cruel disappointment, when his beloved Mershire had seemed strange to him and he had hungered, perversely, to be back in his old shop. 'You and Jane, I've got all I want, boy. Set your mind easy, my dear. . . . Unless,' he added, and paused in hesitation.

'What else, Dad?'

Egg turned the question aside. 'Time enough for that.' He took his son's arm and they sauntered slowly towards the house. 'Don't like the look of that French barn, as you call it. Don't know what possessed 'em to go putting it there.'

This by now was ancient controversy. 'Pretty useful though,' said Nicky.

'Spoils the character of the place. *We* got along

well enough without it, me and your Uncle Algy. And that gate too! What they want to go altering everything for? They've picked the place to bits seemingly, and then put it together again all anyhow.' Nicky being silent, his father added after a pause: 'This yard now! I'd hardly know it. Let alone what they've done to the house.'

Lifting his eyes the old man saw Jane standing outside the back door looking towards them with her hand shading her eyes from the sunlight. The poise of her body, young and lissom, spoke a new maturity. A fine lass he thought, and his eyes rejoiced in the sight of her. A fine lass and well mated to his son. 'There's Jane,' he said.

'Yes,' answered Nicky. 'Looking for us, I expect.' He smiled at his father's enthusiasm.

Egg waved an eager hand to the girl. 'Coming, my dear.' She waved back and turned into the house. Egg suddenly stopped in his walk. 'I know,' said he. 'I remember now, Nicky. Well. *there's* a queer thing to happen!' Nicky's face questioned him. 'Why, brother Willy. That's what I mean. Why I thought of him was this way. The orchard and Pansy it was that put it into my head. That's where I was the day we heard about him being killed.'

'Pansy?' echoed Nicky. 'What's Pansy got to do with it?'

'Tell you I was in that very same bit of an orchard. And there was a sick cow there. Same as it might have been this morning. And your Uncle Algy come running up to me face as white as a sheet. "Egg, my dear fellow, it's all up with poor Willy," he says. "Died like a hero," says he. And those were his very words.' Egg smiled triumphantly to find his memory so good.

Jane greeted them with a question. 'How's Pansy?'

'Mending,' said Egg. 'Ah, we can teach 'em a thing or two yet, Nicky and me.'

She smiled maternally at him. 'Ready for your dinner, I expect.' They took their places round the kitchen table. Nicky carved the cold joint; Egg poured the cider; Jane, at the sink, emptied steaming potatoes from her heavy iron saucepan into her bright new tureen. Nicky's eyes were on his task; he was not quite the boy he had been a moment ago, outside. Egg couldn't make it out, this strangeness in the house. It was a puzzle and a worry to him. His own glance, following the girl as she moved about the room, rested affectionately on her broad gentle face, whose beautiful candour, like Nicky's own, was now veiled, it seemed; but by what veiled?

Not by anger, or at least not by confessed anger; not by unkindness, unless it were an unkindness hidden out of sight far below the surface of those calm eyes. Not by anything that Egg could give a name to. Yet he couldn't resist the suspicion that all was not quite as it should be between Nicky and Jane. They had been married two years now, and there was no sign of a child. Did that mean anything or nothing? Well, said Egg to himself, times have changed a bit in that way, and no bad thing either perhaps, though I don't hold with all I hear. And so saying he dismissed the subject from his mind; or, at least, he gave it a nod of dismissal, and if thereafter it remained, to pester him at intervals, it was by no permission of his.

Not till the late evening, when Egg after his bread and cheese and milk had gone to bed, were the lovers left alone together; and then the constraint weighed still more heavily upon them. They sat in silence for half an hour, a silence which, though each laboured to break it by an occasional remark, survived all trivial interruptions. Nine o'clock had struck, and this was a traditionally sacred hour when they could sit together, the long day's work done at last, and taste lingeringly the sweets of their comradeship; but to-night, and for many nights past, it had been an

hour quickening with anxiety and breeding discomfort between them. Two years of marriage, while diminishing the fever of delight, had deepened their love, which nowadays they were apt to express not in the old way, of frequent passionate avowals, but by various devices of indirection, by banter and mock-quarrelling and comical abuse: in which fashion they had invented between them a whole system and vocabulary of private nonsense that was more intimate than an embrace. And if these exchanges were a frequent substitute for loving demonstration they were sometimes perhaps a substitute for that communion of mind of which Nicky had once dreamed. His marriage with Jane was beautiful and imperfect: it filled him and left him hungry. She was inarticulate; she astonished him alike by her wisdom and her ignorance, the wisdom of a child, the ignorance of one who resists knowledge of which the relevance to personal life is not immediately perceived. During their first year together Nicky somehow contrived in his spare time to write two acts of a poetic drama; and Jane listened to his reading it aloud, and loved him: loved his profile, his voice, the light in his eyes, and loved him for being able to write such difficult things. Her glance was fond and wistful, like that of a mother who is both gratified and intimidated

by her child's cleverness. When he looked up to meet it she said with guilty haste: 'That *is* nice, Nicky! What a wonderful boy you are!' He smiled love at her, but he felt lonely and frustrated, realizing that she had not understood a word of his darling work. 'Well, now comes a little song by way of interlude.' She can't miss this, he thought. 'Janey, you remember that day we went across the hills to Up Elston?——' But no, the idiom of verse utterly obscured his meaning from her. She greeted the lyric with a face rendered all but blank by the effort to conceal her unresponsiveness, a face that would have been null and void but for that hunted look, that desperate anxiety not to disappoint him. 'Yes, I do like that,' she said. Heroic pretence! The pitiful gallantry of it made him fling his manuscript down and take this lovely perplexed child into his arms. She received his kisses gratefully, glad to be comforted, and—though he hated himself the moment after—he could not quite stifle the thought: Yes, she understands this: a thought that was followed, after a long bitter interval, by its antidote—I'm not much of a poet, anyhow: Jane's poetry itself, the darling! . . . But he wasn't altogether convinced by this pretty pleading.

Since then, though his literary ambitions were

far from dead, he talked to her in the evenings of matters nearer home, of sowing and reaping and breeding. The farm he never quite succeeded in seeing through his father's beglamoured eyes: he was inclined still to resent it because it was a destiny not of his own choosing. But it was his work and he accepted it, recognizing its wholesome qualities and enjoying its compensations, chief among which was Jane herself. It was good, it was good indeed, to come back after a hard day in the fields, or a disappointing day at market, to the comfort and rich plenty of Jane. In many ways, as he had to admit when taking stock of it, his situation was perfect. He possessed, at twenty-five, not only a farm of his own, and the wife he had wanted and still loved, but—in the person of his father—a veteran farmer to share the responsibility with him; for though Egg, after so deep a lapse of years, was at first almost as much pupil as teacher, it took him surprisingly little time to pick up the dropped threads. No doubt Nicky knew his job better, in fact, than Egg did; it was rather in enthusiasm that Egg pointed the way. Egg's enthusiasm was infectious up to a point, and even beyond that point Nicky was obliged to put a good face on it; for to have confessed to discontent would have been to disappoint an eager child. His chief lack was the

companionship of his own kind. Nicky, one might almost say, missed something he had never fully experienced. But in imagination, which had school memories to work upon, he had experienced it; he knew that somewhere in the world there was good talk to be had, ideas to be exchanged, fine theories to be filled with words and sent ballooning among clouds of tobacco smoke. Men, men who wrote for the newspapers, were meeting every day in Fleet Street taverns and talking philosophy over their beer: this was Nicky's picture of the journalistic life, and he would have given anything, he thought, to be in it. How wonderful in the midst of a roaring argument about Plato (one of Nicky's fourpenny-box discoveries) to be interrupted by the 'printer's devil clamouring for copy'! How magnificent to dash off a column or two on the spot, with this same devil at one's elbow (his traditional post) and then order another drink as if nothing unusual had happened! But, above all, how intoxicating to hear good talk!—his thoughts, however far they went romancing, always came back to their starting-point. No doubt he wanted to discuss Beauty and Art and similar solemnities proper to his age, and to savour the grandeur of such discussions; but there was more to it than that, for he was consumed by a genuine passion for ideas.

Ideas visited him that were beyond, though not far beyond, his technique of expression; ideas bubbled in his mind, needing release and clarification; ideas came visiting him as he went about the farm. And having no one who could or would listen to him he was driven to confiding his thoughts to a diary; later he overflowed into essays and stories. Being a farmer and being married did not leave him much opportunity for this secret literary indulgence, and often, for weeks at a time, he allowed it to be crowded out. But on reading he stubbornly insisted. He had puzzled Jane, perhaps wounded her, by getting for his own use a camp-bed which he stuck in a corner of their room, with a bookshelf near it and a folding screen to shut in his candlelight, so that he might with an easy conscience read for a while before sleeping. His books included a couple of hundred English classics, a sprinkling of red sevenpennies, such volumes of the Home University Library as treat directly of literature or philosophy, and two volumes of Plato's Dialogues, very much tattered and very precious, for, as Chapman to Keats, so to Nicky Pandervil was the translator of the Apology. These were his friends, and he had few others. With no one outside his household to exchange a word with but people like Fred Curtis, who hadn't a notion be-

yond crops, and Harry Swan, who was everlastingly grumbling about the Government, and old Smart, his father's acquaintance, who drove by the farm every Sunday morning on the way to church and always stopped at Pandervil's to cadge a glass of cider, Nicky sometimes felt like Robinson Crusoe.

But to-night quite other feelings were occupying him, and in the hope of hiding them from Jane he struggled to make conversation with her. Yet they could not for ever be hidden, and it was almost with relief that he heard her say, impatiently brushing aside his laborious banter:

'Nicky, we can't go on like this, can we?'

Meeting her troubled glance he answered soberly: 'No, my dear, we can't.'

'It's a misery, that it is.' Jane spoke indignantly, but without the least trace in her tone of anger against Nicky. 'Better speak your mind, Nicky. It isn't like you to keep me so much in the dark.'

Jane bent again over her darning and waited for Nicky's revelation.

Nicky said: 'Dad's getting to be an old man now. Not far short of eighty, you know.'

'Yes.' Recognizing Nicky's circuitous method of approach, Jane displayed no impatience. 'He'll be seventy-eight.'

'And he's dropping out of things,' complained Nicky. 'I don't mean the farm. He's crazy keen on the farm, we all know. But outside things don't seem to mean anything to him.'

'What sort of things?'

Nicky stared with frowning affection at the brown head bent over a bundle of mending. 'Well, take this morning, for instance, out in the near orchard with old Pansy. Dad was full of a brother of his that got knocked out in the Crimean War. The *Crimean* War, Jane! Think of it!'

'What made your father think of it?'

'Oh, seems he was in that very same orchard when Uncle Algy brought him the news. It's rather terrific, that. A rum feeling. But the strange thing was that all the time he was talking about it he never once remembered *our* war, the real war. I say, Jane, do you realize it's been going on for close on twelve months?'

'What has?'

'This bloody war.' His violence startled her: she looked quickly up. 'And I'm about at the end of my tether.'

She wouldn't help him. She obstinately wouldn't help him. 'What do you mean, end of your tether?'

'I mean I must take a hand in it,' said Nicky. He spoke curtly, because the effort to give utter-

ance to this decision left no smoothness in his voice. 'I'm going to join up,' he added, being resolved to leave her no scope for further equivocation.

'Oh Nicky! Haven't we had all that out before?'

'This is different,' said Nicky. 'I've made up my mind, Jane. I've got to go. I shan't respect myself if I don't.'

Jane dropped her pretences and rose from her seat to face him with anguished eyes and trembling lips. And now there was anger in her voice. 'Who's been getting at you?'

'No one.'

'There were some soldiers hanging about the yard t'other day. Did they talk you round?'

'Of course not.' Nicky flushed under this catechism, feeling like a schoolboy again. 'They only said what had been in my own mind long enough.'

'Ah, they were from the Recruiting Office at Mercester, were they?'

'What if they were!' Good Lord, thought Nicky, are we actually quarrelling, Jane and I!

'Did you tell them the doctor wouldn't pass you for the bank?'

'Oh that!' said Nicky contemptuously. 'That was years ago. I'm fit enough—always have been.

Besides, anything on two legs'll do for the army now.' Seeing her implacable face he fell to brooding awhile; then said: 'Most girls *want* their men to go. They'd be ashamed of a man hanging back.'

'I'm not one of that sort,' said Jane. 'D'you wish I was?'

'No.' He couldn't, even for the argument's sake, pretend that. 'Of all sickening sights the Female Jingo is the worst. It's that kind of cattle started the whole thing, I dare say — bloody-minded half-wits, greybeards, old women. But we've been dragged into it and we've got to see the job through. Can't let those chaps go ramping through Europe as they please.'

'Why can't we?' asked Jane woodenly.

Nicky shrugged his shoulders. 'Think what happened in Belgium. You wouldn't expect me to stand by and look on if that kind of thing happened here, on this farm. Would you now?'

Jane was quietly and desperately weeping. Through her tears she managed to say: 'If I could come with you I wouldn't mind. It's stupid. It's wicked. It won't save Europe, you being killed. Millions of people being killed won't save anything.'

Dimly discerning a truth in her words, he yet stood and stared at her, perplexed by her attitude.

So lovely and so simple-minded a creature, why did she not take the simple-minded view of this war, and believe without question what the newspapers told her day after day? Yet perhaps it was this very simple-mindedness in her that made her cling stupidly he thought, to her conviction of the wickedness of people's hating and killing each other, and made her refuse to listen to argument. She was so sound at core, so wise in her instinctive judgments, that he was the more exasperated by her deafness to reason. Even the blessed word Belgium failed to shake her. She could not or would not see why men who had no quarrel with each other as individuals should fly at each other's throats to oblige their masters. And once, when Nicky began enumerating the reasons, she had remarked infuriatingly: 'I don't know, I'm sure, about that. But Jesus told us to love one another.' What—asked Nicky of himself—what can you do with such a woman?

And now, harrowed by her tears, he could only say, 'Don't cry, Janey! Don't cry, please!' He stroked her hair soothingly. But both words and action lacked the perfect ease of spontaneity: her emotion, though he shared it, made him feel self-conscious, because there was still a fundamental disagreement dividing them. There was, indeed,

open conflict now: he having decided to go fighting, with or without her consent, and she being resolved, it seemed, to oppose his going by every device her wit could invent. He had never loved Jane so much as at this moment, but he loved her at the expense of this new Jane, this enemy, this bitterly weeping woman who had displaced the Jane he knew. To think of her as a stranger provided some defence against the agony of knowing that he was about to leave her.

Her weeping subsided, and as they climbed the stairs together she remarked in a drowsy voice: 'My word, I'll not need rocking to-night. I'm that tired.' It was as if her tears had washed away all the accumulated trouble in her heart. Yet Nicky's self-consciousness persisted. He felt, against all reason, guilty, as though this thing that he was planning to do—fight in his country's cause—were a subtle treachery cloaked in heroic khaki. In the bedroom he was tongue-tied, being embarrassed by a new indecision. Because he was lonely, because Jane seemed shut away from him, he wanted to sleep by her side, comforted by the knowledge of her nearness; and for the same reasons he found it impossible to raise the question, impossible not to do as he had done for some few nights past—set up his separate candle, arrange his screen, and take a

book from the shelf. And for five minutes after Jane had got into her bed he remained standing with an open book in his hand, pretending to be absorbed by what he read and trying trying to make himself say: 'I don't much want to be alone to-night, do you Jane?' But he couldn't say it; the words wouldn't come.

And presently Jane, calling a soft 'Good night', blew her candle out.

He crossed the room to where she lay. Bustling a little, to hide his nervousness, he re-arranged the bed-clothes for her. 'Good night, Janey!' Bending down he gave her a quick shy butterfly kiss and in a moment was gone back to his own corner.

He lay in the darkness and despaired of sleep. A tide of misery rolled over him when he tried to remember all the things that would have to be done. First he would see the harvest in, a matter of not many weeks. Then he would have to talk to his father. No, better join first and talk after. And I must make a will, he thought—for the idea that he would never come home again was present to his mind, though just now it troubled him less than did these minor anxieties. So long as Jane's all right, and the old governor. . . . He woke, astonished to find that he had been asleep. A thin shaft of moonlight fell like a pointing finger

upon the bed where Jane lay quietly sleeplessly thinking. Nicky, listening to her breathing, knew at once that she had been awake all night.

'Are you awake, Janey?'

His voice was thick with drowsiness; hers was quiet and clear. 'Yes.'

'It's hot, isn't it! Can't you sleep?'

'No.'

'Nor can I,' he said, and closed his eyes and was away again.

Next time he woke someone was kneeling at his bedside. 'Hullo, Jane!'

'I was hot,' she answered. But her voice seemed to belie her, so calm was it, so grave, so deeply controlled; her eyes were large and dark and lustrous with profound thought. 'I was hot. I've been sitting by the window with nothing on.'

'Darling! Didn't you feel cold?'

'Yes, so I wrapped myself up in this thing.'

'What is it?' He put out a hand to touch it.

'The eiderdown.'

He sleepily stroked her shoulder. 'Funny girl!'

'I've been thinking, Nicky.'

He roused himself to sit up and attend to her.

'If you're going away from me,' she said after a pause, 'I must have a child.'

'But——'

His mind was full of prudent objections, but she put two fingers lightly on his lips. 'Hush, hush!'

She rose to her full height and lifted her arms so that the covering slipped from her like water from the shoulders of a swimmer and she stood revealed in her lovely perfection, austere in the moonlight. He trembled as he took her in his arms.

2

Egg, when he heard his son's decision, looked like a hurt child; but to Nicky's eager self-justification—'All other chaps of my age went months ago'—he opposed no argument. To outward appearance he took it, as Nicky said, mildly. But a silence fell upon him; fell and enveloped him. He had grown the least bit garrulous with age, or rather with the second youth, the Indian summer, that had blossomed from this happiness of having Nicky and Jane and the farm to care for; he never wearied of last year's crops and this year's prospects and of explaining how if Blossom went to the bull on her right day she'd be in full milk just when Pansy would be drying off. Others may sometimes have wearied of listening, but he did not weary of talking. But now the tide of his speech was dammed up, or had stopped flowing.

Nicky went away in mid-September, the day after the ram was raddled and loosed into Flinders. Egg and Nicky drove to Mercester in the milk-float. Scowling self-consciously the young man gripped his father's hand. 'Well cheerio Dad! I'll write and tell you how I get on.' But Egg only grunted and stared at the old pony's ears; and presently he was in the station-yard, alone with his three milk-churns.

From that day, though he did not neglect the farm, Egg lived in a profound solitude. While he could he watched with a fatherly care over Jane, who, carrying a new life within her, faced day after day, week after week, and nothing certain beyond, with dumb and smiling courage. But even Jane's need, the more that it was never obtruded, did not always compel him from his grey reverie. Too often, for days together, he forgot her; and from these periods of absentness he would return full of unuttered and unavailing self-reproaches. Nowadays, whatever his intentions, he could not but shut himself up with his circling thoughts. Of one thing he was assured: no great harm would come to Nicky, soldier though he was. Others might suffer abominable things, but not Nicky. In due time Nicky would come back home right as a trivet: of that there could be no doubt, as, again and again,

with an almost angry emphasis, Egg told himself. Meanwhile the work of the farm constantly claimed him, and in that he found, as he had found before, a sort of comfort.

With no one to help them but an old man, Roger Bunt, and a youngster well under military age whom they called Beechy, Egg and his daughter-in-law had plenty of work to do. Jane, who was locally famous for her butter and cheeses, did much of her own milking as well as the work of the house; and Egg made the sheep his special care. The ram's belly had been raddled with red, and at a fortnight's end nineteen of the thirty-nine ewes had been touched with that colour. Then they must put blue on him and try again; and, if any ewes remained still untouched with another fortnight gone, there must be a third raddling and this time with black. By means of this triple raddling the ewes could be grouped, so that you knew within a little when their lambs would be born. Indeed there was no lack of things to be doing. Six acres of clover sward had been ploughed in and was now, in October, ready for the wheat that should follow. It was time, too, to sow the oats; and the mangolds and turnips, two and a half acres of them, must be pulled before the frosts came. 'Swedes, we can leave 'em be,' said Roger Bunt. 'They'll take no

harm. So the young master's gone for a soldier, eh Mr Godfrey sir?' The former tenant of the Ridge Farm had been a Godfrey, and Roger had no head for names. His mind worked slowly: Nicky had been gone a month before he found it necessary to speak of his absence, and then it was as if the news had only just reached him. And another absence troubled him now. 'So Sarah Bunt she went off this morning. She's been long going but she's gone now, I spose.' Egg stared at his man questioningly, but Roger, having pulled a few more turnips, went on with placid melancholy: 'Thirty months or more, and aches and pains back and front, poor soul. And now she's gone. . . . Prettiest thing you saw, forty year ago, and a rare 'un for skipping. I've knowed Sarah Bunt since she was *so* high, Sarah Williams she was then, and we've buried our five and raired our three. Queerish her going off like that, and things won't be quite the same I dare say. . . . It'd be three o'clock last night, as near as no matter, she give a sort of skrooking, and when I got a candle, reckon she's going this time poor soul, and when I got a candle, sure enough there she was stark and staring and not a word to say when I talked to her. You fair daunted me, I says, with that skrooking, and now you'm gone, poor soul, and no candle to see

by. . . . Middling good turmuts these are, Mr Godfrey sir.' That was Roger Bunt at his most garrulous, a patient lump of old manhood, younger by several years than his master but looking a great deal older, his body bent by habit towards the earth that had claimed all his labour and would one day claim himself. Beechy, the boy about the place, was young and raw and not very sharp in his wits; for the sake of his mother, who had once lived in sin and was now denied poor relief, he was paid a good deal more than his worth to the farm. Apart from Jane, these two, the old man and the boy, were Egg's only companions. Young neighbours sometimes came—Fred Curtis and wife from down the road, or the Marsdens from t'other side of Keyborough—to sit in a bunch round the fire and between vast intervals of silence discuss not only the price of cattle cake, and what Mr. Ambrose had said to Miss Price of the Grange, but something that was now almost equally important—the news from France. The war did not stop, shewed no sign of stopping. It couldn't of course go on much longer because . . . well, it couldn't, could it? The Government had already begun to interfere, and there were rumours of a more drastic interference to come. Meanwhile the war went on and work went on. Fat bullocks fetched a fine price;

the poultry promised good profit this Christmas; and soon the October sowings were thrusting spears of green into the cold December light.

Nicky was still in England, taking lessons in homicide and sometimes heartily wishing he could begin practising on the persons of his instructors. There were all sorts, good and bad, among the chevrons; and it was easy, if you considered for a moment, to distinguish the voice of conscientious authority from the snarl of the mere cad in office making the most of his chance. A ubiquitous type, this last, recruited either from the ranks of old professionals or from the gutter. During his first few weeks in khaki Nicky found that he had committed himself, body and soul, into the hands of a federation of bullies, who bawled and screamed and shoved at him and his fellows from morning till night, and were assisted in their endeavours by newly recruited toadies eager to escape the whip by learning how to use it. Nicky was sensitive and lacked philosophy; he was too young not to feel degraded when he suffered insult without protest. Denied the relief of action, for it would have been witless to resist this absolute and mechanical tyranny, he took refuge in anger and contempt. The war discovered in him an unexpected capacity for hate, but it was not the enemy that he hated.

When from the height of a month's experience he watched still newer recruits being turned into tame cattle by men who would themselves never go out of England, he thought: What's the good of killing Germans if we leave this muck alive! But his letters home revealed nothing of this bitterness. 'The N.C.O.'s are a pretty tough lot and they keep us on the go, but our corporal, I mean the one in charge of our barrack-room, is quite a decent chap. I dare say the officers are all right, but we hardly ever come within miles of an officer except on parade. They're too sacred to be seen often. Imagine us all standing to attention in the middle of a muddy swamp staring respectfully at distance and hating the Hun like old boots. Then there's a sort of hush. Something's going to happen. It might be the Second Coming by the fuss they make. And then he comes—not Jesus Christ after all, but a lad of eighteen or nineteen, sort of little Lord Fauntleroy, nicely washed and brushed up and keeping a very stern look on his face so as not to burst out crying. I expect he likes the S.M. about as much as we do, poor devil. He looks so lonely standing there, like the johnny in the song. But he has to come and look at our chins all the same, and if there's any sign of a beard we're shot and if there isn't any sign of a moustache we're hanged.

This war is to be won by moustaches it seems. It's a Barber's War. I don't think I shall try for a commission—it would mean starting all over again with a new lot of chaps, and we've got sort of used to each other now and with any luck we shall all get out together . . .' No mention of Christmas, which came bleakly and passed unregretted, a mock-festival for Egg and Jane, and for a million others.

Egg, taking what comfort he could from these letters, would not listen to his fears; and the effort not to listen was perhaps the subtlest and cruellest feature of this waiting. He was glad when, in February, the first lot of lambs began coming; and in the enthusiasm of shepherding them he forgot for a while the necessity of telling himself, with ceaseless iteration, that the war would probably end before Nicky's training was completed. Grey mornings would find him in the field they called the near orchard, going from one pregnant ewe to another. 'You'll not be long now, will you, missus? And how many d'you think *you*'ve got, old lady?' He looked to have some sixty lambs from his thirty-nine ewes. When twins or triplets were born he rejoiced because they swelled the numbers; and when there was but one he rejoiced because the singles were bigger and would get fat before the

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others did; he was determined to think well of his sheep. By timely interference he helped many a weakling into the world, saved the life of many a mother; and then, not without reason, he was wonderfully pleased with himself . . . until he remembered that the war, so soon to end, had not ended yet. He forgot to think of these stupid suffering beasts as so much farming stock; he found relief in worrying about them as though they had been his own kind. When a lamb was stillborn he pitied it, and pitied its mother; when a sheep died, as happened in the first fortnight, he was grieved as well as disconcerted. In reflective moments he knew it was absurd and illogical, since what he handled was only so much potential mutton; but the knowledge made no difference to his instinctive attitude.

No sooner was he deeply absorbed in this occupation than something happened to interrupt him: Nicky came home. Nicky came home for his draft leave: a visit sudden and brief as the flash of a sword, for the boy was away again, bound for the Western Front, while Egg's eyes still dazzled with the cruel splendour of his coming. That same night, unable to sleep with Nicky gone, he got out of bed, dressed, lit a storm lantern, and went out to the near orchard. The air was crisp; a half moon

shone. In the lee of a hurdle a newly born lamb, moist and steaming, was trying to struggle to its legs. Its mother lay exhausted in her straw bed; but, as Egg watched, another ewe, heavy with the womb's burden, came nuzzling up to the newly born with eager triumphant bleating. Egg gave her a gentle tap on the nose. 'Think again, Nellie. Your turn's coming, my dear.' He looked again at the lamb. 'A grand one, you are. And I'll get back to my bed.' Rising from his knees he recalled what had prevented his sleeping, and he thought he would never sleep again. But in this belief he was wrong: he slept, and the morning brought new courage. There was no time for moping: had he not Nicky's farm to look after? He loved to think of the place as Nicky's, and he resolved to make a fine thing of it while the lad was away soldiering. He pictured the homecoming: Well my boy, we've not wasted time, us old 'uns! Meanwhile the new root crops were ready for flat-hoeing; in less than a month there would be between two and three score lambs to tail, and a score or two to castrate; and, before March was out, the four-acre field, where last year's roots had grown, must be sown with barley and clover.

3

Outside, as they all knew, the evening was softly bright after rain; but here, in the dugout, darkness ebbed and flowed, eddying round a flicker of candle-flame. The water that dripped through the roof into Nicky Pandervil's dixie made a resonant *ping* which Frensham pretended to recognize as A-flat. Two lice occupied the men's attention. The first louse was plump, and shone with an ivory lustre; the second, more leggy, suggested (said Private Pandervil) a slave-galley; both were crawling diagonally across the front of a military knapsack. 'Two to one they meet!' offered Corporal Harris. For the lice had started from opposite corners and were moving with geometrical precision, so that it was a nice point, well worth the consideration of any sportsman, whether or not they would reach the apex of the V at the same instant and so meet.

'Take you in tanners, Corporal,' cried Frensham.

'No you don't, Frogs! We ain't all bloated capitalists. Pennies for us.'

'Pennies it is,' agreed Frensham, 'and you're losing 'em, me lad.'

Someone lit a second stump of candle and waved it aloft. Seven faces clustered over the arena.

'The money's yourn, Frogs,' said Harris, add-

ing, with the greatest good humour, 'Hope it chokes you, you old fecundator!'

The plump louse was now crossing its rival's path at a distance of about half an inch. The betting began again: which would reach its corner first? The lad called Smiff cried out, in his shrill, newsboy's voice: 'Me for the little fat bleeder. 'E's got guts, 'e 'as. Nothing showy about 'im, eh Corp? Carm on Frogs, give us one of your sayings nah!' Frensham ignored this artless tribute. ''Ere Goody boy, evens on the little fat bleeder? Take me on?'

But Goodwin was a cautious fellow. 'What are you betting?'

'All I got,' said Smiff. 'All I bloody got, me boy. Can't say fairer. A packet of gaspers.'

'Issue?' asked Goodwin.

'Right first time,' said Smiff.

'Well, you know what to do with 'em, don't you!' returned Goodwin in a sad voice.

The candle moved. 'Keep the glim still, carncher!' said Smiff. 'You'll frighten the poor lil fings.'

The plump louse won the race. 'Good on yer, matey!' said Corporal Harris, cracking the victor under his thumbnail. 'You've earn me fourpence.' Goodwin scooped up the vanquished on the blade

of his jack-knife and held it in the candle-flame.

'Win or lose,' remarked Frensham, idly watching this slaughter, 'it's all one in our war.' He exchanged a grin of understanding with his friend Pandervil. 'A plague on both your louses!'

Nicky sat waiting. For a year or so now, life had seemed to consist largely of waiting, from the first taste of hell in the Recruits Depot to this sitting-out game in the trenches: waiting for uniform, waiting for 'clobber', waiting for parades to begin and to end, waiting for the tide of screaming abuse to subside, waiting for trains, waiting for medical inspection, waiting for punishments, pack drills, 'C.B.', sanitary fatigues, pay stopped, waiting for rations, waiting for pay, waiting for pass, waiting for draft—and now one of a million doomed cattle waiting for the fall of the pole-axe. But he was unfeignedly glad to be in the trenches again: the people at the Convalescent Camp had seen to it that he should be glad of that, though indeed the place was a paradise compared with the ordinary Base Depot. He was back in the trenches among men he had got used to, and under officers and non-commissioned officers who had other things to do than organize persecution of the rank and file. Here was danger and terror and filth and

infinite aching monotony, but here, too, was a sense of comradeship with one's fellow-cattle, and even with one's helpless well-meaning sorely-tried drovers, a comradeship that rendered the obscene adventure of war by one degree less ignoble.

Nicky waited. In a few hours he was to steal out across No Man's Land on a patrol. He was not thinking of that: he had learned the art of enjoying ease when one has it. But underneath his surface thoughts he was waiting for the ordeal to begin. Either I shall be killed or not, so why worry? Perhaps I shall be dead by to-morrow; perhaps I shall be dead by this afternoon; perhaps I shall be dead before five minutes have passed. He had schooled himself to face this idea of imminent death not only without flinching but with a certain detachment, as though it were something that scarcely concerned him. Sometimes, when shelling began, he said to himself coolly: It may be this one. But when it was over, and he still alive, he could never be quite cool about that: there was always surprise in the thought, and joy, and a cruel —quickly suppressed—hope of home. Jane was now become something inconceivably lovely, in whose existence he could hardly believe. He dared not let himself think of her, and he could not, after a while, remember her face, except in dreams when

he saw her—as he had seen his chum Tony Grant five days ago—mutilated and writhing and screaming for the favour of quick death. She too had faced death and had given him a son, now ten weeks old; and he tried in vain to stifle the hope that when this particular little binge was over he might get ten days' leave to England. He stared at his vision of a world gone mad, and he waited. He waited for the convulsion to cease. He had a rifle, a bayonet, and a revolver; and not infrequently he was entrusted with bombs. All this seemed to him the very height of stupidity . . . but the war went on and on, and he did as he was told, indulging secretly—it was the only outlet he had for the rage that consumed him—in much flamboyant rant. Will it ever end? Not till we're all maggots. And then p'raps the old blokes at home'll be satisfied. Grand march past of the victorious army down Whitehall with the band playing and the flags wagging and the girls getting randy. All present Sa'ant Major? All present and correct sir! They don't seem to move very *smartly*, Sa'ant Major, I *must* say! No sir, you see sir, the fact is sir, they're MAGGOTS sir! Is that so Sa'ant Major! Why what a glorious war it must have been! I'm sorry it's over by Gad! So are we all sir. . . . Meanwhile we soldiers sit at ease and

search our shirts for lice. Rhyming with mice. But not with rats, which is a pity. They like this war, the rats do, it's a jubilee for 'em. Corpses, one of, passed to you for necessary action please. Brother Worm and Sister Louse, bless the master of this house. Ever since he met a shell, he has gone to live in hell. Or in heaven to dwell, as the case may be, according to his rank and station. Leaving these well-ventilated premises for favour of your kind occupation. Rhyming with station. But not you, you little leaping bastard . . . dear flea, gentle jumper, do I wrong thee when I say that thy father and thy mother were not joined by Holy Church? Anyhow you're dead now, so blast you! . . . Jane. I wonder what she's doing now. The last of the milking p'raps. And we've got a son—with *my* eyes too. Just in time for the next war, he'll be. That's fine, Jane. Feed him up my dear. And when he's fat enough we'll ram him into the cannon's mouth for King and Country. Oh and God too of course, but he comes a bad third. I wonder what he thinks of this war. Pooh, nothing at all; why should he? A little difference among cheesemites doesn't concern *him*. 'Does it, Frogs?'

'Does who what?' asked Frensham.

'I was wondering what the Authorities think about this little do of ours.'

'The brass hats, the red tabs, the dooks?'

'No. The haloes. Them Above.'

Frensham winked. 'Can't say. But I hear they've interned the Holy Ghost. They say he's related to the Zeitgeist, a notorious Hun.'

'Oh shut yer fuddy rah for Crysike!' It was Godden, with his customary snarl. 'You two rudders make me fuddy-well sick. Fink yerselves fuddy clever, doncher. Well I fink you're a fuddy pair of fuddy sops, see!' He turned to his fellow-Cockney, Smiff. 'Say Smiffy, did I ever tell you about that 'ot lil piece of stuff I pick up dahn E-Taps. 'Ere mamselle I says, do you . . .'

Smiff groaned with extravagant emphasis. 'Not agyne, boy! Not agyne! Go on talking, Frogs. Don't know what you're talking *abaht*, but it's a treat to 'ear you.'

'Yes, isn't it?' said Frensham. 'Give us a song, Smiff, there's a good lad.'

'Oh damn songs!' put in Nicky. 'Let's hear you sell your papers, Smiffy.'

Smiff grinned happily at this invitation, and the next instant he was the newsboy again, calling his wares in an English street: 'Late Final. Century by Jessop.' His shrill voice held its own gallantly against the rumble and crash of the bombardment —the piping of a bird in a thunderstorm. Every-

one listened with bright eyes and a heart full of civilian memories.

Corporal Harris, grinning wistfully, gave utterance to the general sentiment. 'It don't 'arf take yer back, don't it! Good old Smiffy!'

Nicky, outwardly taking part in this merriment, sat alone in himself and waited, waited. Across the chasm of separation he saluted, humbly and with love, the bright spirits surrounding him: Frensham the lawyer, who like himself had been Grant's friend; Harris, once a decent steady-going drayman, now a conscientious soldier; and Smith, the lad this moment entertaining them; illiterate and gay and innocently foul-mouthed. Nicky felt that he knew these three men with a profound intimacy: in imagination he detached them from the war and set them against the background of their former so different environments. Frensham he respected for having lived on the fringe of that literary world which he himself had once longed to enter (but he, Nicky, had done with that nonsense: all he wanted now was the home he had left, precisely as he had left it, nothing altered; and he dared not, even in his thoughts, ask for that). Harris, a married man of forty, was as simple as Frensham was sophisticated. Sometimes he talked of his wife and children, who were, it was easy to

see, the cardinal facts of existence for him, the motive force behind three parts of his activity; and sometimes he talked of the French brothels which —for you never knew where you'd be to-morrow— he seldom failed to visit when the chance offered, being (it seemed) blissfully unaware of any inconsistency; and so, thought Nicky, making a sudden discovery, there *isn't* any inconsistency for Harris; he's innocent as a babe, old Harris is; his sins are of the flesh and trivial. Not like that gloating swine Godden! And Smiff, with his sharp-featured impudent puckish face, was like a terrier with its tail always on the wag; and when he, emulating Godden, began talking of the girls he had 'gorn wiv', the effect was richly diverting: Ariel—a Cockney Ariel—pretending to be Caliban. The rest meant little or nothing to Nicky. Goodwin was habitually morose: a clerk born and bred, a clerk by habit and by inclination, he would never smile again till he could wear striped 'trousering' and a pen behind his ear, and say to the Teashop waitress: 'I want a nice cup of coffee, please miss!' knowing well that all coffee came from the same urn. Macdonald was a square-faced taciturn Presbyterian Scot; and Godden was Godden, a mere part of war's incidental beastliness.

And still, under these thoughts and recollections,

Nicky was waiting. The boom and hiss of the enemy's fire, the rumble and crackle and shriek—these sounds drifted away and died down, till at last they seemed but the echo of a distant warfare. The earth ceased shuddering, and it became difficult to decide whether what one heard was external or merely remembered. The spirit of Nicky Pandervil crouched in its form like a hare: not frightened, not hoping, not moving, but alert and listening, awaiting the invisible event. Disregarding this silence within him, his random thoughts ran on. If there *is* a God, why doesn't he get a broom and sweep us all away? Such a mess as we are. Or clap strait waistcoats on the lot of us? When Satan heard about this war they say he just turned sulky. Hi Satan, says God, what are you doing there you idle scamp! Me, I've packed up, says Satan; them Christians o' yourn are doing *my* job: 'taint fair. He's seen better days, Satan has; a bit rough in his speech now; not quite the gentleman. But the same good chap at heart. Him the Almighty Power hurled headlong flaming from the ethereal sky. But it was only a sham fight—charades to fool the children with. Meaning us. After it was all over they met round the corner and had a good laugh at our expense. The poor gulls, they said, the poor silly gulls! They're singing

hymns to me now — do you hear 'em Satan? Hosanna in the highest—that's a good 'un, that is! And God nudges Satan and Satan winks at God and this dear bloody little war goes on. As flies to wanton boys, ti-tum ti-tum ti-tum, they kill us for their sport. That bit's right anyhow. They kill us for their sport. . . . But, said Nicky to himself, sobering a little, there isn't Anyone—at least not to matter, not that we know of. There's no one even to laugh. That makes it worse somehow; lonelier. I wonder why dead bodies get so swollen? It must be gas. Like a damn great balloon it was—as though it was trying to be funny. And succeeding, what's more. How the chaps laughed!—at first: afterwards they didn't laugh. Fancy people doing *that* to each other—Shakespeare and Beethoven failing to agree. Just a little quiet discussion conducted with machine-guns and what not. To convince you of your mistake, Shakespeare, I'll have a bang at you with this nine-pounder. To make my meaning clearer, Beethoven, I'll stick this bayonet through your musical guts. Poetry putrefaction music and maggots, and God Save the King. The argument's over and honour's satisfied—what a stink! That's the worst of this warm weather: honour won't keep.

A voice like tearing iron called from above: 'Pandervil! Smith!'

'Here, Sa'ant!'

'Here, Sa'ant!'

The voice had jerked them to their feet. 'Double up, lads!'

'Come along, Smiff!' said Nicky. 'The gallows is ready.'

He scrambled up into the trench, Smiff following. Others were waiting in a whispering bunch for them. 'All present?' said the Sergeant. 'Now listen here.' Nicky listened to the instructions with but half his mind, though he easily mastered them: the other half was occupied with its own affairs. He must do this and that, and on no account the other: his brain responded instantly, as with a click: everything being arranged he moved forward with mechanical precision. I'm a clockwork man, he thought; and I wonder how long we shall last once we're through the wire. The night's not dark enough for this job, blast their eyes!

With that oath, the first and last of his panic fear was expelled: there remained only a tautness of the nerves and a fierce cold concentration on doing what must be done. I must get through this job, he thought; but his thoughts dared not give the reason for this imperative. And now they

were through the wire and crawling on their bellies towards the enemy lines. The grass smelt like Coppett's Piece; the wet earth was fragrant; and a cool autumn wind, with a delicious hint of wood smoke in it, came to meet him. Someone coughed in the far distance: friend or enemy? A light shot up into the sky, hovered and splayed. The world seemed suddenly ablaze with light, and Nicky felt as though he were transfixed upon a table with a thousand knives poised above him and a thousand pairs of eyes hating him. He gulped back his heart, and lay very still, and waited. The field grew dark again, but he did not move. I'm still alive, how extraordinary! There was no intellectual gall left in him now; that talkative self, that anger, was peeled away, leaving his spirit exposed. But, pressing his belly closer against the ground, he felt fear draining out of him and a host of silly little thoughts came pattering in. His eyes were wide open to the darkness: like a rabbit, he thought; and he remembered how often he had stood and watched the little beasts squatting outside their warren and had wished that he needn't bother to shoot them, and, wishing so, had wavered in his aim—stupid waste of shot. He lapsed into a state that was more than half dreaming, from which he was presently recalled by a crackling

noise. The machine guns were beginning. Someone's getting excited, he thought, grinning hysterically into the grass; we're putting the wind up 'em. He crawled slowly on, hardly knowing why. Backwards or forwards, it made no difference which way. He could hear the bullets dropping all round him, and he pictured the air as a grey veil being torn to shreds. The crackle suddenly ceased; he felt warm blood oozing from his ears; the ground rose up and flung him into the air. Christ O Christ they've got me . . . There was nothing left in the world but pain. If it gets worse than this I can't bear it. But it got worse and he was still alive. Worse and then worse; and then he was somehow a little detached from it and thinking of other things. He closed his eyes and drifted . . . and when he opened them again the sky was reddening. I'm in a shell-hole; it's morning. He noticed presently a pool of rainwater. Have I bled all that?—the same question as he had asked once, in childhood, of his father, feeling important and rather proud. He remembered that time. Venturing to move his head a few inches, there's been a scrap, he said; and recognizing a friend he tried to say aloud 'Hullo, Smiffy!', but the effort made blood gush out of his mouth. Smith stared blankly with a surprised comical

grimace; and made no response, his head and one shoulder being all that was left to him. They've made a mess of you haven't they; and Nicky closed his eyes again. It's apple-harvest at home, he thought. He was very tired. Jane I want you. He had never been so tired before. I say, Jane, just look at what they've done to old Smiff.

CHAPTER THE FIFTH

THE LAST DAYS

I

Old William Smart, who had recently caused scandal by changing wives with his brother and appearing to be none the worse for it, called to have a chat with his neighbour Pandervil one bright autumn morning, and to warn him of what that dratted government fellow was a-doing. Egg leaned on his yard gate enjoying the sunshine; William Smart sat at ease in his pony-cart holding the loose reins.

'Has he bin to see you, Mr Pandervil?'

'Not yet. What should he want with me, Mr Smart?'

'Want?' Mr. Smart chuckled. 'What won't he want? He'll want to run y'r farm for you, that's all he'll want.' Mr Smart seemed to think this a prime joke. His china-blue eyes shining, his face creased with merriment, he was a pleasant-looking old scoundrel. It's a pity, thought Egg, that he leads such a bad life with his drinking and worse. 'Run y'r farm, that's all,' repeated Mr Smart.

'Oh, will he indeed!' said Egg. 'I don't know as I shall be so easy about that. This is my son's

farm, Mr Smart; my son Nicholas. He's in France, is my son, fighting to keep a whole skin on this young jackanapes of an inspector and the like. What's *he* doing out of khaki?'

'He's doing what I say, sir. Whoa Topsy! Stand still, my lass! What's he doing? Showing us old 'uns how to grow corn. And *where* to grow corn, what's more. D'ye know what I did last week? You don't?'

Egg shook his head, hoping to hear nothing he'd have to disapprove of. You never knew with William Smart. Not content with doing wicked things, as likely as not he'd tell you about them and expect you to enjoy the story as much as he did. A genial fellow and an amusing companion: no one disputed that. But the impudence of him! The impudence of his expecting decent people to have any truck with him at all, and him a man who behaved as though he didn't know what sin was! That he was a regular churchgoer made his conduct the more infamous: it provided dissenters with an excuse for being publicly thankful that William Smart was not of their persuasion. To the saintly it was a wonder, not to say a scandal, that the Lord had not cut him off long ago; they were hard put to it not to declare outright that the Lord was unpardonably lax in this affair. Egg,

though innocent of malice, liked to keep abreast of current gossip; he knew pretty well what was being said of old Smart, and he was doubtful whether to encourage him to tell any more.

'Well, what I did last week was this. I'll tell you, neighbour. I took and ploughed up the Vicarage lawn.'

'What! That fine old lawn! You never did, surely!'

Mr Smart was pleased with the effect of his news. 'Yes, Mr Pandervil, a fine old lawn it was. You're right there. But I ploughed it up, and double ploughed it up, and the Vicar stood by smiling like a Christian martyr.'

'He dint prosecute you?' Egg was puzzled, though not nearly so puzzled as he looked. He liked to amuse himself with a little benevolent hypocrisy. 'He dint try to shoo you away?'

Mr Smart laughed joyfully. 'Not at all, neighbour. He thanked me.'

'Thanked you!'

'What's more, he *paid* me.'

'Well well,' said Egg, in mock despair, 'wonders will never cease, they say. Now whaddid he want that fine lawn ploughed up for? Wants to grow his own bread, eh?

'Just so. Patriotism, don't you see? Each and

all we must try to do our bit, Mr Smart, says the Vicar to me. Each and all, Mr. Smart. This is *my* little bit, and I hope the example may be followed throughout my parish. The country needs food. The country needs more corn . . . That's what he said, or near enough. But not all, not by a long way.'

'Indeed? What more did he say?'

'Told me a thing or two he thought I ought to know. No matter. No matter.' Mr Smart smiled at a memory, and eyed his neighbour wistfully, as a man will who wants to talk indiscreetly and is not sure of his audience. 'How's yours keeping, Mr Pandervil? Mrs Nicholas and the grandson.'

'Eh, thank you. Pretty well.' Egg's eyes shone. 'He's a fine strong boy. Full of life he is, and beginning to take notice of things already. Always got a smile for his grandpa.' This was Egg's special subject, and he couldn't leave it. 'You should see him hold out his little arms when the candle comes near, or anything o' that. Of course he can't *hold* anything yet, in his fingers I mean, I don't mean he throws back, not more than's only to be expected. He can't, I mean, *catch* hold of things: he drops 'em. But that's to come. I remember my son Nicky was the same. Dessay they all are, but I remember noticing Nicky. But sharp

as sharp. He won't miss much I'll wager. A good head on him, the very spit of his dad.'

'Ah yes.' Old Smart nodded kindly. 'What news of the boy?'

'Seems he's right enough. We don't hear much just now. The last we had was one of these Field Postcards. You know 'em, I expect. Scratch out what don't apply: that's the idea. Better than nothing. But there was talk, there *was* talk——' He paused: should he tell or not? Was it tempting fate, to publish the glorious hope? 'There was talk of a bit of leave soon, to look at the baby, you know. He wasn't sure, but he said he'd try for it.'

'That'd be soonish, I expect?'

The hope made Egg almost breathless. 'Almost any time,' he said, with strained quietness. His heart pounded noisily; he saw old Smart through a mist.

'A bad bad business, the war,' said Smart, staring at his pony's ears and shaking his head slowly.

'Um,' said Egg. 'But it can't go on for much longer now.' It was half a question. He watched for the reply.

'Ay, a bad business,' repeated Smart.

'I give it another three months,' said Egg, anxious to provoke an opinion from Smart, whom now, suddenly and for no clear reason, he re-

garded as an oracle. The turn of phrase, so foreign to his own way of thinking, was borrowed from younger and more confident prophets, who ever since the war's beginning had been generously giving it another month or two. The months of its duration now numbered twenty-six, but Egg's appetite for prophecy was undiminished. He always listened eagerly to such discussions, and treasured in his memory all the more hopeful things that were said. He himself was not, in general and in public, optimistic about the war: rather was he apt, in conversation, to take a gloomy view, so that others might contradict and convince him. Instinctively, without thought, he cultivated the art of making people say about the war what he most wanted to hear, his method varying, of necessity, with the disposition of his interlocutor. With William Smart he dared to sound a hopeful note. 'I give it,' he said again, 'another three months.' And getting no answer he was forced to add: 'How does it strike *you*, Mr Smart?'

Smart deliberated. 'Well, what I say is this: when the end does come, it'll come sudden. That's my view. Don't ye think so, Mr Pandervil?'

Balked of his desire for a comforting prognosis, Egg lost interest in the talk. 'Mrs Smart well?' he asked civilly, not unwilling to make an end of it.

'Thank ye. Ay, she's middling well.'

Egg made a noise of polite gratification. 'Glass of cider, Mr Smart?'

At this invitation the visitor got out of his cart, tethered the pony to the gatepost, and walked across the yard with his neighbour in the direction of the cider-barrel. He tasted the cider and found it good. 'A bit of good stuff this, Mr Pandervil. Here's luck, sir, to you and yours!' Having emptied the glass he waved away his host's suggestion of refilling it, and stood ruminating. 'You asked me a question I'm not often asked, Mr Pandervil.'

'Eh?' said Egg. 'What was that?'

'Yes, you did. A neighbourly question. How's Mrs Smart keeping, you said. Now that's a question I'm not often asked.'

Egg felt uncomfortable, suddenly remembering the great Smart scandal. At the beginning of the conversation it had been prominently in his mind, but Nicky and the war had driven it out. 'Sure you won't have another drop o' cider?'

'Not another drop. I dursn't, neighbour. Old Topsy'd run away with me if I'd two glasses of *that* sparkler in my belly. Well, your remark about Mrs Smart minds me of what the Vicar said, time I ploughed up his lawn for 'im. I've bin

hearing a strange tale about you and y'r brother, Mr Smart, he says; a strange tale and a sad, says he. So I waited and waited to hear what this strange tale might be, but seems the Vicar was shy, for he um'd and ah'd and coughed before he could get out a word of it. I hear, Mr Smart, you no longer live with y'r wife: is it true? Yes, it's true enough, I said, this is the way it happened—And you a churchman, says the Vicar, never missing a Sunday! What do you come to church for, man? Well Vicar, give us a chance, sir: a man can't break with all his bad habits at once. But he wouldn't smile, not him, but must needs go on to say how that's not all he heard, and then, *oopsa*-daizy, out comes the story of me and brother Bob. It was this way, Mr Pandervil. Me and my wife, Alice by name, took and drove over to have a bite of supper with Bob and Katie. Alice and Katie are sisters, and Bob and me, being much of an age, courted 'em together. We were getting along for fifty then, and I'd been married before, but Bob was new to it. Nice girls both, and 'twas touch and go which of us had which. Well, I was saying, we drove over to see Bob and Katie back in the summer, a matter of three months ago, and it just popped into our heads, all four of us, that a change was as good as a rest. So up you get, Katie, says

I, bundling her into the trap, and if you're as good a girl as y'r sister you'll do, for there's something about you . . . Well we joked a bit on the way home, but time we come in sight of the house seems Katie 'ad been thinking it over. Doesn't seem hardly right, William, me coming with you like this. Not right, why what's wrong with it: I'm not such a bad old fellow and there's but twenty years between us. It's not that, William, there's no harm in you, healthy and spry you are, and I've always had a kindness for you if it comes to that. But I'm not your wife, and talking won't make me so. Wife, my dear! You're wife enough. You're Mrs Smart, aint ye? And I'm *Mr* Smart. So what's wrong wi' that? . . . So off we went to bed, if you please, and she soon got into the way of it, did Katie, and she's here to this day and asking no better. But there's not so many folks as speaks after Mrs Smart in a neighbourly way like y'rself, Mr Pandervil.'

Egg was taken aback. He did not know what to answer. Here was most flagrant sin rioting unchecked, and he, against his will, was being made almost a party to it. He grunted; and bent down to examine the tap of the cider barrel.

'Ah,' said William Smart. 'And I dare say *you* think I'm a wicked old rascal, too, eh?'

Egg stood up and met a searching glance. 'Wicked, yes. It's wicked enough, there's no gainsaying. But that's between you and them and . . . well, and the Almighty, I spose, if it's my opinion you're asking.' Profoundly embarrassed, and wishing he had said nothing, he went on hastily: 'None of my affair anyhow. *I'm* not God, and don't set up to be. Now just you come and look here, Mr Smart, at my cowshed.'

'Cowshed? Why, what's to do with the cowshed?'

'You'll see, you'll see!' As they crossed the yard to the cowshed Egg became excited with triumph, anticipating the day when he would enact this same scene with Nicky. For an instant, having his back to William Smart, he pretended that this was Nicky following him. 'There, Mr Smart. What d'ye think of that?'

'Well, well, well!' Smart was impressed. 'I shouldn't know the place. Never seen it looking so clean before, and I've known the Ridge Farm, being a neighbour, for a matter of forty year.'

'New concrete floor, y'see, with a trifle of slope on it,' said Egg, anxious that no feature of the change should be overlooked. 'You see that, Mr Smart?'

'Indeed, I do, sir. Indeed I do. *And* a runnel

for the muck. That'll make all the difference, that runnel will.'

Egg's heart warmed to the man. 'Making everything shipshape, don't you see,' he confided, 'against the boy's coming home. Got this cowshed up my sleeve, as they say. A little surprise for him.'

Smart nodded. 'Well . . .' He hovered a moment; then nodded again, and was away, stamping back to his pony and cart. Egg lingered awhile, his eyes enjoying the sunlit yard and the many-gabled house, until he remembered that it was about time for the postman to come with the second delivery: unless, he said to himself as he hurried in, my watch has gone and got fast again. 'Jane, where are you, my dear?' She was not in the kitchen, and he was about to call again, but checked himself lest he should wake the cradled child, whose life, as yet, consisted of little beyond feeding and sleeping. She'll be out at the front door watching for the postman, he thought, and, going to look for her there, he began preparing himself for the possibility, even the probability, of there not being a letter this afternoon. Most days he and Jane were disappointed, and were put to the trouble of pretending, each to the other, that they hadn't expected anything. He

tried now to discourage the silly hope in his breast, that tiresome fluttering bird; but, no matter what he said, the creature wouldn't rest, wouldn't be still, wouldn't stop singing its lovely nonsense.

He found Jane in the road, receiving a letter from the hand of the postman. The impudent dog was staring at her rather curiously, Egg thought. What the devil does he mean by it! A fine girl she was, a fine hearty girl, and being a mother had enriched her charm. But she was Nicky's wife, wasn't she!—and not one to be stared at by this moony-eyed postman. She was Nicky's wife, and Nicky's father clicked the latch of the gate with angry emphasis.

'Is there a letter, Jane?' His tone was almost peremptory.

Even then, confound it, she didn't instantly look round. She was saying something to that fellow. When she did turn she confronted her father-in-law with a strange face, a stubborn child's face he thought it. She came to him with Nicky's letter in her hand, took his arm, and contrived to smile.

'Stared at you, that man did!' said Egg.

'What man?' Her face seemed to close again; its habitual candour had vanished.

'That postman, who else!' Egg's voice was sharp. 'What's he want to stare for!'

'I didn't notice,' said Jane. She hadn't yet opened her letter, though her eyes were fixed upon it. 'Let's go in and read what he says, Dad.'

They went through the kitchen together. Jane, tearing the envelope open, paused to examine the censor's pencilled signature in the left-hand corner. Egg was impatient. What's the matter with the wench, he asked indignantly. Don't she *want* to read her letter! She drew the letter from its sheath and stared at the first page. Her face was wooden. Suddenly she pushed the letter towards him.

'You read it first, Dad.' Egg, nervously polishing the lenses of his spectacles, shot a quick surprised glance at her. 'I must go to Eggie,' said Jane. 'He's crying.' She ran from the room.

Egg had heard no crying. He was mystified and suspicious. But here was Nicky's letter for him to read, and his fingers trembled as they approached it. It would be a family letter, with a little private one, doubly folded, for Jane alone. How unlike Jane to be so cool about a letter from France. That absurd hope still fluttered in his breast: perhaps this was to say that the boy would soon be back home, on a ten days' leave, or even, perhaps, that the end was in sight. But no, it was the usual letter, saying nothing much, bits of

Nickyish fun here and there but on the whole rather mechanical in its cheerfulness. A disappointment, as letters always were. Egg had been disappointed in this way so many times before, but he had not yet mastered his lesson, he had not yet learned to save himself pain by abandoning hope. He left the letter lying on the kitchen table, and turned away feeling empty and defeated. He had eaten his cake, every crumb of it, and was still hungry. There was nothing to do but go on waiting.

2

But indeed there was much to do, and next morning he and his men were busy in the orchard filling their baskets with Camleys, a smallish dark-green apple much grown in South Mershire and very plentiful this year. It was a private point of honour with Egg to do his share—rather more than his share—of stripping the taller trees, because the having to climb the ladder, stood as it often must be against a swaying branch, challenged his courage; he dreaded the ordeal, and for that very reason would not shirk it; he had been nimble enough at this work in his boyhood, and he was resolved to prove to himself, against all reason and despite all appearances, that he was as

young as he used to be. This morning the world was fresh to his sight and fragrant to his nostrils; standing on his ladder in the heart of an apple tree, with the laden boughs enclosing him and the ground a green patch dizzily far below, he half-believed himself a boy again. Leaning dangerously this way and that, towards such fruit as hung beyond easy reach, he worked on until the basket was so heavy that the forearm from which it hung throbbed with pain, and the shoulder ached and the hand longed to loosen its clutch on the ladder. Before beginning the hazardous downward journey, he must pause, nevertheless, to taste once more that queer vision of a bright sky trickling through the gaps in the green roof; and when he was safely back on the ground he looked about him with wondering eyes, seeing the orchard saturated with his own history. It was not that he recalled in this moment the incidents of that history; faces from the past did not throng into his vision, nor voices long silenced sound in his ears; it was rather a quality that he perceived, the distilled essence of a vanished yet real and existing time; he felt the orchard as personal to him, one with him, part of his intimate life. The feeling came and went like a breath, and then he was thinking how they must look sharp about getting the wheat sown.

Next week'll be soon enough. I must give Roger a hand wi' the roots again; he's not as quick as he was this time twelvemonth, and he was never what you'd call quick.

Next day, after breakfast, at which ceremony Jane excused herself from appearing (what ails that girl? he thought; there's something mighty queer about this!), Egg made ready to drive into Keyborough with a load of fruit for the market; for some of the more enterprising local people, Nicky among them, had started a Poultry and Fruit Market that was held every fortnight at a place very handy for Keyborough Station. The packed boxes were heavier, it seemed to Egg, than they had been last year, and Beechy, who helped him with the loading, was even more stupid than usual. Egg began to fume and fret in the privacy of his mind, being still, by lifelong habit, too gentle to give verbal vent to his impatience. We shall be late, that's what we shall be, I know we shall. And the more he worried the more his back ached, and the less able was he to cope with the complication of difficulties which this once simple-seeming task confronted him with. 'Come along, Beechy. Look alive, my boy.' Beechy, grinning and blushing, fumbled with the harness; his master, in a state of controlled frenzy, snatched

the belly-strap from him and after two abortive attempts succeeded in fastening it. 'That'll do. You be off now and help Roger with those roots, boy.'

The last straw was added to his burden of exasperation by Jane, who suddenly darted out of the house to intercept him. 'Must you go to market this morning?'

He stared at her crossly. 'Must I go to market! What d'ye mean, child?' There was a plot against him. She thought him too old for his work, too old to manage his son's farm: the suspicion was gall to him. 'What else should I be doing, pray?'

'I wish,' said Jane—she was red-eyed, she's been crying thought Egg, but her face wore now a mulish look—'I wish you'd let *me* take the fruit in this morning. You didn't ought to do so much.'

'So that's it!' He thought his guess confirmed. 'Well, let me tell you, m'dear, I can manage well enough yet a bit. Not many could at my age perhaps, but I can. See?' In spite of his annoyance he smiled at her kindly. I'm a difficult old fellow to lead, that's what she's thinking, bless her little heart! And so I am, and so I will be. 'You run along in like a good girl,' he added, see-

ing she made no movement to go, 'and cook me a nice dinner against I get back.'

Still Jane did not move. 'Let me come with you then.'

'Why?' He began losing patience again. 'What's come over you?'

'I want to come,' said Jane stubbornly, 'that's why.'

He eyed her pale face intently. 'You're not ill, are you, my dear?'

'I'm not feeling so well. I don't want to be left alone. There!' she said eagerly, 'now you've got it, Dad. So just wait while I get my coat on.'

Egg did not quite believe this story of not feeling well, though her appearance was consistent with it. He felt that she was hiding something, 'And who's to see after the little'un, tell me that.' Ah, he thought, that'll have cornered her.

'Mary's here. Mary Curtis. She'll be staying with him an hour or two till I'm back. She came and offered.'

'Mary Curtis here! First I've heard of it,' complained Egg. 'Seems you've made y'r plans, my girl.'

'And I can be back in time to feed him when he wants me,' she quickly added.

'Oh, very well . . .' Egg grumbled acquiescence,

still peevish to think that he was being managed; but during the drive to Keyborough, a matter of fifteen to twenty minutes, he forgot his grievance and was free to notice with more solicitude how silent and listless she was. Still, women were like that sometimes, poor things, and I dare say, he said, there's no call to worry. 'Got a headache have you Jane?'

She brightened at once, but with a brightness that seemed not quite natural. 'Oh nothing much! I had a letter from Mother this morning. Did I tell you?'

'Indeed you did not.' He wondered why she had not told him of this; for any letter was an event, something to talk about and share.

'Yes, and what do you think! She's expecting a baby, Mother is.'

'A baby. Where from?' Engaged with his problem Egg answered absent-mindedly. He knew, as everyone did, that twelve months ago Mrs Marsh had consoled herself for the loss of Jane by marrying George Withers, an old admirer; but the meaning of Jane's news did not immediately penetrate his anxious reverie.

'Where from? What a question!' Jane smiled, though wanly. 'Her own, I mean. She's going to have a baby. Just fancy!'

'God bless my soul!' Egg laughed to himself. 'Lemme see, how old would y'r mother be now?'

'She's just forty-five, according to my reckoning. What a surprise for everyone!'

'Forty-five, eh? Well, Nicky's mother was forty-nine turned, I remember, and a bit more, when Nicky was born. Some folks say old parents have poor children, but Nicky wasn't so poor.' He smiled at a memory. 'When he was little I sometimes used to bath him. A sturdy child he was, although they pretended he was delicate. Stuff and nonsense. He'd come out of his bath all pinky and clean, and now, I used to tell 'im, you're fit to kiss the ladies, my dear . . . He liked that, Nicky did.' Jane said nothing. 'No,' went on Egg, 'I wouldn't a called Nicky a poor child. And I wouldn't call 'im poor *now*. Whadda *you* say, Jane, eh?'

Jane did not seem to have heard the question, for she had turned her back on him and was burrowing mysteriously among the cargo of apples. Disappointed to find her not responding to his sentiment, he said no more. He did not even ask Jane why she sat so silent, her face half-averted from him; for he was becoming impatient of the mystery. She's not enjoying the trip: why did she come? He remembered that postman and

the way he had looked at her—almost a loving look, you could a called it, and there she was, with Nicky's letter in her hand, and dint seem to care whether she read it or not. Not a very cheering letter, he reflected, no more talk of leave in it, but nothing to be so put out about. I give it up; they beat me, women do. Ah, there's Allchurch. 'Morning, Mr Allchurch! Fine morning!' He turned his horse's head into the market square, glad to see that he was arrived in good time after all.

'Morning, Mr Duke!'

'Morning, Mr Pandervil!'

Duke seemed surprised to see him. So had Allchurch, now he came to think of it. What was the matter with them?

'Jane, did you see how those two stared?'

'Did they?' asked Jane. 'I don't think they did. Just your fancy, I expect.'

'I tell you they *stared*,' insisted Egg, petulantly. 'I've got eyes, haven't I? Take a look at me, Jane. Is there anything wrong wi' the look of me?' He fingered his collar and tie, and, finding nothing wrong there, jumped out of the cart and called to one of the market porters to come and unload for him. At the sound of his voice a group of men standing near stopped talking and looked

up at him. On their faces he read the same baffling story. He returned their stare angrily, and they instantly looked away, looked uncomfortably away. Feeling more selfconscious than he had felt since boyhood, he strolled round the market, nodding to this man and speaking to that and discussing prices with a third; and he was nettled to find Jane always at his elbow, a preposterous Jane, a talkative Jane, altogether too eager to chip in, and sometimes pulling at his sleeve and whispering some nonsense about his catching cold if they stood too long chattering. Trying to make an invalid of him! And he had never, he swore, felt better in his life, except for these pains that beat in him, with the beating of his heart, whenever he dared to imagine Nicky's return.

3

Jane's silences, by making him feel shut out of her confidence, forced Egg to indulge these fond imaginings more freely than was his habit. During the next few days he was for ever starting conversations that would lead to Nicky if carried far enough, and Jane acquired quite a knack of cutting them short without apparent violence. But it can't go on, she said, *I* can't go on; and on the eve of the next market, which was Mercester

market, sooner than endure another public ordeal she resolved to make an end of this silence between them that was now, like a dividing sword, so sharp and glittering a thing. The curtains were drawn, the lamps lit. Nicky's child was asleep upstairs; Jane and Egg sat warming themselves by the kitchen fire.

'I wonder what the boy's doing now,' said Egg, more than half to himself.

Jane rose from her chair. 'I must tell you something, Dad. I thought to keep it back.' Her voice was cold; he could see that she trembled. She came and stood close by his chair, put a hand on his shoulder, and kissed his forehead.

'Well, my dear?' He patted her hand.

She spoke again, but in a different voice. 'We'll need to be brave, darling. It's Nicky, he . . . he won't be coming home to us.' She leaned nearer to him, pillowing the aged head on her bosom. Maternal, she was old as the earth, and he, bewildered, a child in her arms. 'I had the message Monday. Four days and nights I've had it.'

He was restive in the embrace. He put his hands on her shoulders and held her at arms' length, gazing strangely into her face. 'What d'you mean?' His voice rose. 'Say it again. Something about Nicky coming home.'

She faced him, and was firm. 'He's not coming home. They've killed him.'

He stared stupidly. 'Not Nicky. Not *killed*. There's some mistake.'

'Here's the letter,' said Jane.

A white shape fluttered under his eyes. He pushed it away.

'Not Nicky!' he insisted.

He could not bear this truth; with all his being he rejected it. The walls of the kitchen were misty; they crumbled, they grew dark, and he felt himself falling into a great pit. He was walking down a long grey tunnel, and he could hear the pad pad of pursuing feet, but from which direction they came, whether overtaking or meeting him, he could not decide, and while he stood with cowering head expecting something to leap on him the tunnel became a shaft going straight down into the heart of the earth, but if I can only get low enough, he thought, if I only run fast enough down the hole I shall get to Australia or somewhere and make a fresh start with the grocery, if only I run fast enough, but he was now in a bottle, packed tight and corked in, and a huge hand lifted the bottle up and an enormous eye stared at him, like a big goldfish, he muttered, and wondered whether the thing with the eye could hear him and

wondered how soon the hand would draw the cork and drink him out of the bottle, and at once a large mouth came into view and the cork began squeaking, there was an explosion, he felt himself foaming out of the bottle's neck and crawling over a large pink finger of which the pores were as big as rabbit-holes, and if I fall into one of 'em, help! help!—but it was already too late, he had fallen, he was falling still, into a great pit, and now he was in a long grey tunnel that bored through the earth, he thought, and if only I can run fast enough and get to the other side and make a new start in life, with firelighters so cheap and all the customers satisfied, if only I can get out of this bottle . . . A voice came, gentle and soothing. 'Just a drop more! I've got you safe.'

The mist wavered and vanished, and he could see a young woman bending over him. It was she, no doubt, that had spoken. Her right arm pillowed his head, and her left hand held to his lips a teacup from which rose the fumes of brandy. A fire tingled in his throat. I've been ill, he thought, I've been run over. Obediently he swallowed a little more brandy. He stared dazedly, first at the young woman, then at the room: at the brick floor, at the dresser full of shining crockery, at the fire on the hearth. How did I get here?

'Have I been ill?'

'You sort of fainted, that's all.' The young woman smiled; a wonderful kind face, he thought, and smiled back at her.

'Fainted? First time in my life!' He closed his eyes for a moment, trying to puzzle things out. 'Where's Carrie? Does she know—about me fainting, I mean?'

'It was only for a minute,' said the young woman. 'And you're not quite yourself yet, darling,' she surprisingly added. 'But you're better. Your colour's coming back.'

To be called darling by this lovely young stranger gave Egg a very queer feeling, and the thought crossed his mind that perhaps he was dreaming or had died and was now in heaven. Am I young again? I feel young. The kindness shining in her face made it impossible for him to take his eyes off her. He could well believe her to be an angel. And she recalled to his mind someone who had been very precious to him.

'I feel,' he said, 'sort of funny. I don't seem to quite know what's been happening and . . . where I am. And I don't seem to know *you*, young lady.'

'You don't know *me!*'

Her cry, whether of pain or fear he hardly

knew, made him feel ashamed of having blundered into speech. Staring, he searched his mind for some clue to her. He clutched eagerly at a fancy. 'Are you . . . you're not . . . you're not Monica, are you?' The name, so long unspoken even in his thoughts, surprised himself.

'I'm Jane, of course. You know me, Dad. Of course you do. I'm Jane.'

'Jane?' His face fell. 'I don't remember . . . now what Jane would that be, my dear?'

'Oh dear!' He saw that she was distressed. 'Your Jane. Nicky's Jane. Jane Pandervil.'

'Oh!' A light began dawning in his eyes. 'Then you're my little sister.' He spoke his thought aloud. 'So it *is* heaven, because,' he argued triumphantly, 'you died a year or two back, didn't you, Jane!' He got out of his chair and gaped round the room. 'And this is our old kitchen again.' His glance coming to rest at last on Jane, he marvelled anew: nearly fifty when she died, his sister Jane was now, in this blessed place, a young girl. 'Are they all here, Mother and Willy and all?'

'Listen!' she said, taking his two hands in her own. 'I'm Nicky's Jane.' Fear stared from her eyes. 'Not your sister, your daughter-in-law.'

'I don't understand.' He felt puzzled beyond

endurance, and hurt, and on the verge of tears. His mouth trembled.

'Your son Nicky. I was his wife.'

Egg frowned. Was she playing some silly trick on him? 'No son of that name.'

'Think, Dad. Try to remember. Your youngest son, Nicky.'

'No,' said Egg. 'I don't know what makes you say things like that. Harold's my youngest. Eleven, Harold is; and his brother Bobbie's fourteen. And'—his face grew anxious—'where's Carrie? I want to speak to Carrie.'

The young woman who called herself Jane had sunk into a chair and was quietly crying. She answered him through tears. 'There's no Carrie here. There's only me.'

'Don't cry, my dear.' He put out a thin hand and stroked her bowed head. 'You meant no harm. But I *must* be getting back to my wife, don't you see, or she'll be flying into one of her tempers.' He paused, his hand still resting on the girl's head. Could he tell her more? She seemed the understanding sort: not one to be shocked. 'You see, young lady, my wife's what they call expecting, almost any day now it might be. And at her time of life, which is near fifty, folks can't be too careful with themselves.'

Jane, wiping her eyes, resumed her patient maternal role. In this moment she envied him. She was both bitter and glad. I'll let him be: 'tis best so. She addressed herself to the task of persuading him to accept his strange situation and go to bed and think no more for a while of Carrie and the unborn child.

'Now, Dad, please to take a good look at me.'

'Why d'you call me that?'

She ignored the question. 'Please to take a good look at me, Mr Pandervil. You don't think I mean you any harm, do you?'

Looking into her eyes he could not think that. 'No, my dear child.'

'Very well then. Now, listen . . .'

Ten minutes later she led him to his room. 'If you want anything in the night, I'll be within call. I'll be just over there. You won't forget?'

He promised, gratefully, not to forget: bewildered though he was, there was still room in him for gratitude. She lightly kissed his cheek and left him, and he stood musing in a strange bedroom: strange yet not quite strange, for after staring about him, and looking out of the window into the dove-grey night, he at last realized, recovering the savour of an old experience, that this was the very bedroom he had shared with his

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brother Algy a lifetime earlier. That remote past lay stretched before his mind's eye like a self-luminous pictorial map. His memory, keen-edged, cut through the deposit left by the years of his Farringay exile, and discovered to him the intimate features of the former time. Seems like yesterday, he thought. But it isn't: I wasn't much moren a boy those days, and now I'm a man turned fifty-three; nor did he think to glance at the dressing-table mirror, from which would have looked back at him an old, time-written face with sunken cheeks and a child's eyes dark with wonder and perplexity. It was a problem, but that other and more urgent problem left him not at peace to consider it. How came he to be here at all; who would see after Carrie and the shop in his absence; and who was this young woman, this Jane, so gentle and beautiful? Yes, she's beautiful, she takes me back . . . And she's a rare kind one, whoever she may be. He slowly undressed and got into bed: a strange bed, he thought; it's queer to be sleeping alone; and he pictured himself lying awake all night worrying conscientiously about Carrie.

But he did not think of Carrie for long: he fell into a half sleep, in which pictures flowed endlessly past him and a voice babbled. Jerked awake from

time to time by a convulsive movement of his body he found that he himself was the author of this babble. He hungered for deep sleep, but his mind thronged with images for which some chatterbox in him, the moment he released control, was quick to find a monotonous accompaniment of words. He heard his thoughts rattling along and was powerless to stop them. Willy in the Cavalry. Don't be a gert fool, Willy. Killed, poor buddy, and all because that bitch of a girl likes red. May I send 'em for you, ma'am—oh, no trouble, no trouble at all, no hubble and bubble at all. I called you a beast, Father, down in the kitchen I did, a beast and I want you to beat me, please, and make me a good boy, Crussuk Amen. An' all kind friends, Monica Wrenn. Let's go the orchard way, grass and water the orchard way, it's longer. Ladies go nim nim nim . . . grass, water, fountains, mountains . . . mountains of milk and snow.

In the morning, before it was quite light, the door of the bedroom opened. He sat up, startled. But he was not surprised to see Jane, for he had not slept: under the surface ripple of fancy he had remained awake all the time, awake and aware without ceasing of the strangeness of what had befallen him. He was eager for explanations, so

eager that he could hardly listen to Jane asking how he had slept and saying that here was a nice cup of tea for him.

'How did I get here? I want to know. I must know.'

'Yes, yes,' she said soothingly. 'Would you like to get up to breakfast, like you always do?'

'I want to know. I've a right to know. I'm not a child.'

But not till he was washed and dressed, and had broken his fast, would Jane begin to answer his questions with anything beyond evasions. Like a child he sulked a little, and like a child he suffered himself to be coaxed into good behaviour. She stayed with him while he dressed. 'I'll look out of the window, Mr Pandervil. So you needn't be shy of me.' But she stood, not by the window, but in front of the mirror, which, presently, when she fancied him absorbed in his own thoughts, she picked up and carried out of the room.

'Whad you do that for?' he demanded, on her return.

She pretended not to understand.

'That looking-glass. Why did you take it away?'

''Tisn't safe,' said Jane, 'that's why. It'll fall

over one day and break. And that's bad luck, they say, breaking a looking-glass.'

'H'm!' He was not satisfied. 'How'm I to shave myself then?'

'Now don't be quarrelsome, *please!*' She smiled winningly. 'I'll see about your shaving, after breakfast. You've been a tiny bit ill, don't you see, and I've to take care of you.'

At the breakfast table, after he had eaten all he could be persuaded to take, the questions began again; and now Jane tried to answer them. A score of times she had to say: 'No, please don't interrupt. Let me finish. I'm only trying to help you.' And when she had told, without mention of Nicky, all she knew, the old man sat staring at her with pain and vexation in his eyes.

'So there isn't any Carrie. Is that what you're telling me?'

'She died years ago. Nearly ten years.'

'And I'm . . . I'm an old man, eh?'

Jane nodded, biting her lip.

'How you can sit there,' cried Egg, 'a nice girl like you, a nice *kind*-looking girl I'd have said, how you can sit there and tell such *lies*. . . !' He brought his fists down on the table with a crash, making the crockery jump; and tears began streaming from his eyes.

4

Before many hours had gone by he felt bitterly ashamed of that outburst, for he could see that it had frightened the young woman. He tried to make amends, arguing, entreating, and sometimes, seeing what a youngster she was, humouring her whim. For indeed she was very young, not much above twenty-two or three, and already a widow, poor thing: her husband, she told him, had been killed at the front not a week ago. It's bin a long war, he reflected sadly: those Boers are harder nuts to crack than we thought 'em. And she had a child to care for, a bonny little chap: did that make it better or worse for her? Better, he supposed: it would help to keep her mind off her trouble; and when, back from roaming perplexedly but not unhappily the once familiar fields of his old farm, he chanced to surprise her in the act of suckling her babe, the beauty of the picture—the mother bending, the child clinging—drew tears into his eyes. But talking to her proved a sad waste of time. She would not listen to reason, but clung stubbornly to her fantastic story. It seemed to Egg more and more probable that the shock of that recent bereavement had unsettled the poor lass's wits. He resolved that during his stay with

her—and he had quite forgotten to make plans for getting back to Farringay—he must try to be very patient and kind.

At noon the comparative serenity of his mood was shattered by the visit of a man from Mercester. 'This is the doctor, darling. He wants to have a talk with you,' said Jane, slipping her hand into his. Darling again! Egg would have none of her darlings and pettings. He was suddenly suspicious and afraid. This fellow was too sleek and suave; too knowing by half; he meant mischief.

'Good afternoon, Mr Pandervil. We've met before, you know. I helped your young grandson into the world only a while ago.' Egg would not answer. He was convinced now that whatever he said would be used to prove him mad. He was cornered; the world was against him. 'Yes, we've met, Mr Pandervil. But you don't remember me, do you? You're a bit dazed.'

'P'raps I am a bit dazed,' said Egg. Surely it was safe to admit that much.

'Ah,' said the doctor, 'I know the feeling well. I should just think I do. When I was a student I was very keen on biking. No one pushes a bike nowadays: it's all this motor stuff. Well one day I smashed into a brewer's dray, and it knocked me

silly, I can tell you. Couldn't remember who I was or what I was when they picked me up.'

Egg was listening intently, but he made no response.

'What I needed,' went on this talkative doctor, 'was a good long rest . . .'

Something sinister in that phrase broke down Egg's rigid self-control and sent him tottering towards Jane, whose arms opened to receive him. 'You won't let him put me away, my dear? You wouldn't do that, would you?' He clung to her shoulders. 'I'm sane. I . . . I think I am.'

'You're as sane,' said the doctor, 'as I was after that accident with the bike. A night's good sleep is what you want first of all. Lucky for me it wasn't a boneshaker I was riding.'

Egg, with a twinge of shame for his bad manners, put fear away from him and remembered his duties as host. 'Shall we all sit down?'

'Thank you.' The doctor sat down.

'I remember those boneshakers very well,' remarked Egg, 'though I'd never trust myself on one.'

'Don't blame you,' said the doctor heartily. 'The only one I've seen was at a music hall . . .'

He began to talk about the music halls of his youth. His eyes kindled with pleasant memories

. . . and ten minutes later, quite liking the fellow by now, Egg offered no objection to having his pulse felt, his heart examined, his temperature taken.

'And these little pellets,' said the doctor, rising at last to go, 'are to help you sleep. Take one or two, not more than two, just before you get into bed. With a little water or milk . . . And may I come and see you again to-morrow? Thanks, then I will.'

The young woman, though she still cast anxious glances at him, seemed on the whole happier for the doctor's visit. But Egg was not happy. That doctor had meant well; he was harmless and good-natured and no doubt clever in his own way. But he was siding with this deluded or deceiving girl; though no mention had been made of it Egg knew that the doctor, too, would have him believe Carrie dead, and himself, Carrie's husband, an old man. As to that last theory, there was one way of proving it nonsense, thought Egg with a flash of his former anger; and, as he moved quietly out of the room, he looked sidelong at Jane, thinking how cunning it had been of her to take the looking-glass away from him.

Which bedroom should he look in first? Not his own and Algy's: it wouldn't have been put back

there. Sarah's perhaps, or Flisher's. Undecided, and fearing detection, he stood listening for the footsteps that he feared might follow him, the voice, gentle but authoritative, that would forbid him; but after an anxious moment, remembering the room that his mother and father had occupied, he tiptoed down the passage and grasped the handle of the door. He pushed open the door, went in, and raising his eyes saw a figure crouched, a face that watched him, giving back stare for stare: the face of a very old man whose chin bristled with white stubble. Egg gasped and drew back, clutching at his temples. The movement was reflected; he understood. A cloud came between himself and himself in the mirror; came and enfolded him in a darkness through which, moved by an unknown compulsion, he tunnelled his way up towards a speck of light infinitely far above. The tunnel was vertical and slippery; its sides were sleek and moist like a dog's nose, but he, against his will, was sliding up it, he couldn't stop, up and up, with his head craned back flat against his neck, and his sick gaze turned towards that point of light, that dagger piercing to his very brain, he thought, and I don't want to go up, I want to go down and get to Australia and make a fresh start with the grocery, but now with a rush

he was at the top of the shaft, and the light was burning and blinding him . . . He came to himself.

5

He came to himself burdened with the conviction that Jane was hiding something from him. Her behaviour with the postman, her behaviour at the market—it was a great worry to a man, and even his astonishment and alarm at finding himself stretched on the floor of Nicky's bedroom could not distract him from the worry. How did I get here? Must have fainted or something. And what time of day is it? He glanced at himself in the wardrobe mirror and tut-tutted when he saw that he had forgotten to shave. He was profoundly puzzled. The last thing he could remember was sitting in the lamplit kitchen with Jane; and now it was daylight. He looked out of the window. It seemed like afternoon; but it was giddy work gazing at strong sunlight and he was glad to turn his eyes away. I must go and see what that Roger's about. I've had a bad turn, there's no doubt of it. It doesn't do to leave things to other folk. There's the wheat to be sown; and quickly, or we'll get behind with things.

Having decided that it was afternoon, he

wondered whether the postman had come and whether there was anything from Nicky. Moving cautiously, for he had quite the feeling of having been rather ill, he began descending the stairs, but was forced to stop and sit down half way, overcome by giddiness. He clung desperately to the bannisters, forlorn and frightened but pretending to himself to be jaunty. Mother Noom, he muttered, she met her death falling downstairs, did Mother Noom; I mustn't do that, I mustn't die yet a bit, there may be a letter from Nicky downstairs. I must get down somehow; can't sit here all day. His head drooped to his knees, and after a while he felt the giddiness passing and was able to resume the hazardous journey. Holding on to the bannisters he shuffled on his bottom from stair to stair, not trusting himself to stand until he was safely down.

He stood up. The house seemed to sway a little, but not so badly as before. Hugging the wall he made his way slowly towards the kitchen, the room most in use, hoping with all his heart that Jane was not there. Likely enough she'd be in the dairy or the wash-house. He hoped she was not in the kitchen, for she was hiding something from him and there might be a letter from Nicky. He remembered something about a letter, remembered

vaguely how a white shape had fluttered before his eyes like a huge butterfly; and now, gaining the kitchen, and finding it empty as he had wished, he paused and looked round, as if nosing for scent. A letter from Nicky, and Jane was keeping it from him! The likeliest place was the broad window-sill where Jane kept a miscellany of the things—encountered in her periodic tidying-up—that did not seem to belong to any other place; a church calendar embodying a coloured picture of the Good Shepherd, a pile of household bills held down by an eight-ounce weight, cooking recipes cut out of the *Mercester Chronicle*, and a sixpenny packet of stationery. Ashamed to be prying, but still indignant and resolved, he searched for five minutes among these things without finding anything to the purpose. And now the mantel-shelf, he thought; he felt breathless, for this delay was edging his excitement with anxiety. But before turning to the mantel-shelf he lifted Jane's work-box from its place on the sill, and there, where the box had been, lay a sheet of folded paper.

Ah, what's this! He unfolded the paper, flattened it on the sill, and fumbled for his spectacle-case. A letter from the War Office, he could decipher that much, but the rest was blurred to his weak sight. He found his spectacles and put

them on. That's better! That's splendid! Now, let's see what they . . . What's it mean? Killed in action . . . killed . . . that means he won't come back . . . poor Willy! But before he had read the letter to the end his mind was clear again. He stared into the idiot face of outrage. My son Nicky, my little son . . . now you're fit to kiss the ladies, Nicky . . . O Jesus let me die.

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